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Connecting Models of Family Stress to Inequality: Parental Arrest and Family Life

Objective: *We expand upon family stress models, highlighting how stressors are structured by broader contexts of social inequality, to understand how criminal justice contact is associated with family functioning.*

Background: *We draw attention to two stages of existing family stress models. First, exposure to family stressors is* differential*, based on status positions within the social structure. Second, stressors influence families via two types of stress proliferation—from one individual to the family unit and from primary to secondary stressors—that are both shaped by social inequality.*

Method: *To empirically illustrate this framework, we use data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (*N *= 4,074) to provide the first systematic examination of the relationship between one commonly experienced stressor, parental arrest, and family life.*

Results: *The findings document the differential social patterning of mothers' and fathers' arrest for families. Mothers' recent arrest (but not fathers' recent arrest) is a primary familial stressor, with these associations concentrated among partnerships that were residential (rather than nonresidential) prior to arrest. Mothers' arrest engenders the secondary stressor of material hardship, and together the primary and secondary stressors are associated with increased relationship dissolution, decreased relationship quality, and decreased coparenting.*

Conclusions: *By highlighting unequal exposure to stressors and differential consequences of stressors, we suggest that the family stress model can explain inequality between families.*

Introduction

With its dramatic growth and disparate concentration among less advantaged groups, the criminal justice system has become a central force in structuring inequality in the United States (Wakefield & Uggen, 2010). Recent scholarship documents how criminal justice contact—and typically, incarceration—exacerbates inequalities across a variety of domains, including family life. Research consistently shows that incarceration has mostly deleterious consequences for families, including an increased probability of union dissolution, reduced relationship quality, and impaired coparenting relationships (e.g., Comfort, 2008; Turney & Wildeman, 2013; for an overview, see Poehlmann-Tynan & Arditti, 2018).

Although foundational, scholarship on the burdens of criminal justice contact for families typically focuses on the incarceration of men. Incarceration—albeit important to family life—is only one form of criminal justice

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contact; additionally, police stops, arrests, convictions, and supervision all comprise the carceral net (Lerman & Weaver, 2014). Moreover, although criminal justice contact is most prevalent among men, women comprise an increasing share of those experiencing criminal justice contact. For example, arrest rates among men have decreased throughout the past two decades, but they have increased among women (Snyder, 2012), with about one-fifth of women in the United States experiencing arrest by age 23 (Brame, Bushway, Paternoster, & Turner, 2014). The overwhelming focus on male incarceration—and, accordingly, the exclusion of women and other forms of criminal justice contact—likely underestimates the full scope of the criminal justice system's consequences for families.

To understand the role of criminal justice contact in family life, we show how front-end processes of family stress models can be usefully integrated in the broader context of social inequality. Family stress theories focus on the family as an organizational unit that experiences and copes with stressors, the consequences of which can lead to family dysfunction and disintegration (Arditti, 2016; Conger et al., 2002; Hill, 1958; Lavee, McCubbin, & Olson, 1987; McCubbin, Cauble, & Patterson, 1982). We augment these frameworks by connecting inequalities at the social structural level to the likelihood of exposure to stressors and to their consequences for families.

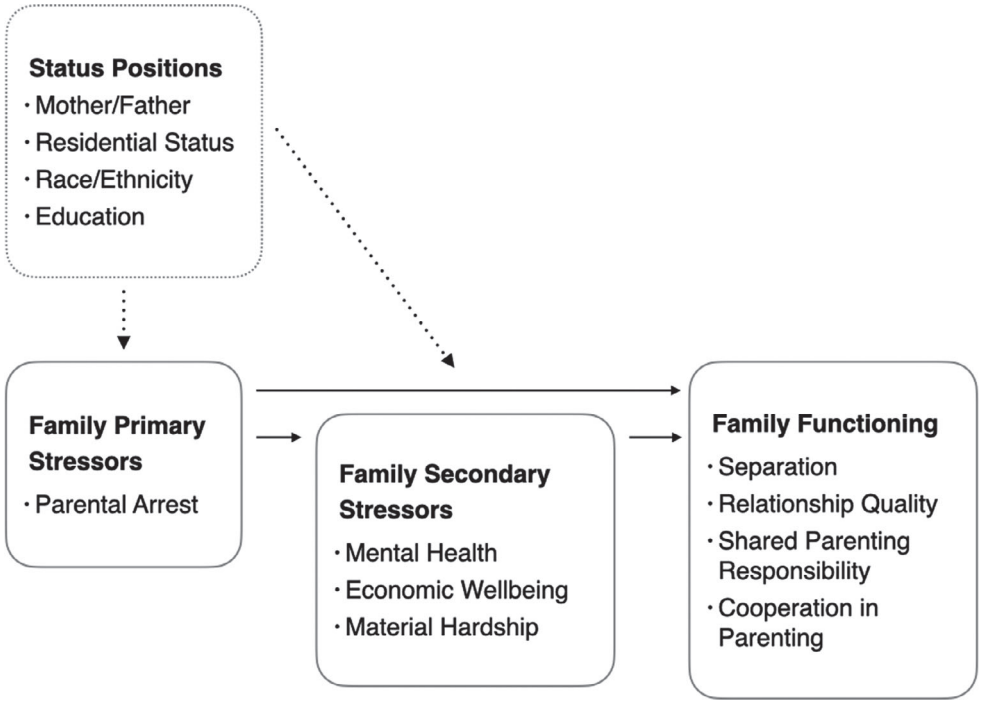
We forward a family stress model that is cognizant of the family unit's structure and connected to the broader context of inequality. Specifically, we propose that status positions influence *differential exposure* to family stressors and that they affect the process of *stress proliferation* for family-level outcomes. We focus on the differential roles of mothers and fathers within families, both in terms of their likelihood of experiencing stressors and the ramifications of those stressors for family life. We empirically illustrate this framework with data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (https://fragilefamilies.princeton.edu), providing the first systematic examination of the consequences of one commonly experienced stressor, parental arrest, for union dissolution, relationship quality, and coparenting. These interrelated indicators of family life are important because they tap into the functioning of the family unit and, specifically, the relationships between parents (Pearlin & Turner, 1987).

The Family Stress Model

The relationship between parental arrest and family life can be understood through a conceptual model that elaborates upon family stress theories. Although there are several theories about family-level stress, we refer to two dominant theories by Conger and Elder Jr (1994) and Hill (1958). Hill's (1949) ABCX model of family stress (also see McCubbin & Patterson, 1983; McCubbin et al., 1980) suggests that crises are produced by stressors interacting with a family's resources and the definition that a family makes of the stressor. Conger and Elder Jr's (1994) (also see Conger et al., 2002; see Arditti, 2016 for a focus on incarceration) discussions of family stress examine the sequential relationship between stressors of economic hardship, family relationships, parenting, and children's well-being. We provide a rigorous analytic accounting of one piece of existing family stress models, the association between family stressors and relationships between parents (measured as union dissolution, relationship quality, and coparenting), with a focus on both the contingencies in this association and the mechanisms underlying this association. In doing so, we provide a theoretical and empirical framework for further interrogating how inequality shapes other parts of the model including parenting and children's well-being (Conger & Elder Jr, 1994).

Although there are important distinctions between the two theories, both have fundamentally shaped our understanding of how families respond to stressors and how stressors impair family wellbeing. At the same time, however, there are opportunities to extend these theories to account for the range of stressors experienced by families, inequalities in exposure to stressors, differential proliferation of stressors to the family unit, and the variety of indicators of family wellbeing. A model by Conger and Elder Jr (1994), for example, refers exclusively to the stressor of economic hardship experienced by families and focuses on sequential stages of economic hardship, family relationships, parenting, and children's well-being. We suggest that a model capturing other familial stressors is consistent with the stress process paradigm that considers a more comprehensive range of stressors (Pearlin, 1989).

Figure 1. The Expanded Family Stress Model and Parental Arrest.



We bring attention to how societal inequalities and status positions influence exposure to stressors and their consequences for family life. We posit two main stages (see Figure 1). First, families are exposed to primary social stressors (Arditti, 2016; Conger et al., 2002; Hill, 1949, 1958; Milkie, 2010; Pearlin, Aneshensel, & LeBlanc, 1997; Pearlin & Turner, 1987), such that the likelihood of exposure depends on status positions within the social structure and is often concentrated among individuals and families in disadvantaged statuses (Arditti, 2018; Pearlin, 1989). Second, primary stressors can influence family life differentially based on status positions via two types of stress proliferation—from one individual (such as a mother or father) to the family and from primary to secondary stressors (Barr, Simons, Simons, Beach, & Philibert, 2018; Pearlin et al., 1997; Pearlin, Schieman, Fazio, & Meersman, 2005; Wethington, 2000).

Differential Exposure to Family Stressors

Family stress theories were not originally concerned with the likelihood of experiencing stressors (Hill, 1958), despite the fact that individuals and families have unequal vulnerabilities of exposure. Therefore, in the first stage of our family stress model, we highlight how a family's exposure to stressors, such as parental arrest, depends on status positions (Arditti, 2018; Pearlin, 1989; also see Pearlin & Turner, 1987; Thoits, 2010).

Arrest, a stressor that is unequally distributed across the population, is one type of criminal justice contact that is markedly prevalent in the contemporary United States. An estimated 12.2 million individuals are arrested annually (U.S. Department of Justice, 2013), and between 30% and 41% of individuals have experienced an arrest by age 23 (Brame, Turner, Paternoster, & Bushway, 2012). Although arrest rates are disproportionately prevalent among men, arrests rates among women have increased over the past several decades (Kruttschnitt, 2013) and the cumulative prevalence of arrest among women is high, with about 20% ever arrested by age 23 (Brame et al., 2014). Importantly, increases in arrest rates among women do not reflect escalations in criminal behavior; rather, these increases

have been attributed to changing enforcement patterns (Feld, 2009; Schwartz & Rookey, 2008).

Arrests, like many stressors, are differentially patterned by other social positions and are disproportionately concentrated among those with low education and racial/ethnic minorities (Pearlin, 1989). Nearly half of all non-Hispanic Black males have experienced an arrest by age 23 (49%, as compared to 38% of non-Hispanic White males) (Brame et al., 2014). These racial/ethnic differences are not similarly applicable to women (e.g., an estimated 20% of non-Hispanic White women and 18% of non-Hispanic Black women experience an arrest by age 23; Brame et al., 2014). Instead, as we will show with our intersectional approach (Poehlmann-Tynan & Arditti, 2018), there are other status positions (e.g., educational attainment, residential status) that differentiate women's exposure to arrest.

Proliferation of Family Stressors

In the second stage of our family stress model, we propose that status positions within a family influence how stressors spill over to the family via two types of stress proliferation, first by transferring from one individual to the entire family unit and second by facilitating additional secondary stressors (Pearlin et al., 2005).

Proliferation Between Individuals. Stressors can transfer from one individual to the family unit (also sometimes called stress contagion [Barr et al., 2018; Wethington, 2000] or, in the literature on parental incarceration, "collateral consequences" [Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999]). Although the entire family can be exposed to stressors, stressors often affect families through the spillover of stressors from one family member to the rest of the household, as in the case of parental arrest. The idea of stress proliferation from one individual to another is consistent with the broader concept of "linked lives," or the view that individual experiences and hardships spill over to others (Milkie, 2010; Pearlin, 2009; Pearlin et al., 1997; Pearlin et al., 2005; Thoits, 2010). In terms of parental arrest, the salience of between-person stress proliferation to the family unit depends on the individual's status position within the family and the closeness of the individual to the family. Specifically, we consider differential between-person stress proliferation based on two types of roles within the family: gender and residential status of the family member exposed to the stressor.

First, the consequences of between-person stress proliferation for families may depend on whether the mother or father is exposed to the stressor, as in the case of mothers' or fathers' arrest (Pearlin & Turner, 1987). Women often hold central roles in family life (e.g., Leverentz, 2014; Stack, 1975). They are more directly involved in childcare activities. They are considered "kinkeepers," or family members who actively work to provide communication and support to others, facilitating emotional closeness and solidarity within families (Rosenthal, 1985). Because mothers are commonly closely linked to their families, the stressors of mothers' arrest, compared to those of fathers' arrest, may transfer more directly to the family (Pearlin & Turner, 1987).

Second, families are likely to experience greater strains when a residential family member (as opposed to a nonresidential family member) experiences the stressor, as residential family members are more closely linked to the family. Indeed, research on the relationship between incarceration and family life consistently finds that paternal incarceration is most deleterious among families in which the father resided with the family immediately prior to incarceration (e.g., Turney & Wildeman, 2013).

In both of these cases—mothers' arrest (compared to fathers' arrest) and residential status (compared to nonresidential status)—we expect that the closeness of the individual to the family influences the salience of stress proliferation to the family unit. The fact that families may respond differentially to criminal justice contact is consistent with research on the effects of maternal incarceration, which shows negative consequences for some children and null consequences for other children (Turney & Wildeman, 2015).

Proliferation Between Stressors. Initial family stressors can also proliferate to engender additional secondary stressors, which together exert a toll on families. Initial (or primary) stressors can result in a chain of other reverberating strains (Conger & Elder Jr, 1994; Pearlin et al., 1997). In the case of parental arrest, arrest can exert both primary and secondary stressors on family life.

Parental arrest, an acute traumatic experience that involves police contact, may be a primary

stressor that has consequences for family life including union dissolution, relationship quality, and coparenting. First, the police contact accompanying an arrest can involve invasive searches of one's body or belongings, emotional degradation, and physical violence (Rios, 2011; Stuart, 2016). This trauma may affect the arrested individual, family members who witness (and also experience) the trauma (Dallaire & Wilson, 2010), and the interactions between family members. Second, arrest is a stigmatizing experience (Lerman & Weaver, 2014), which may enable relationship problems and retreat from parenting responsibilities (Braman, 2004). Third, arrest can involve court appearances, participation in programs, bureaucratic procedural requirements, and tasks to prepare for these obligations (Kohler-Hausmann, 2013), all of which entail time away from maintaining family relationships. Fourth, arrest can create uncertainty about the future, or anticipatory stress (Pearlin & Bierman, 2013), resulting in preemptive withdrawal from family responsibilities. Parents who are arrested experience uncertainty about whether they will be eventually charged, convicted, and/or incarcerated, and may be concerned about the toll these experiences will take on their partners and children. Prior research on arrests suggests that this anticipatory stress that can be consequential for wellbeing (Sugie & Turney, 2017). Other research focused on children's well-being shows that witnessing parental arrest can threaten one's safety and security, ultimately facilitating psychosocial maladjustment (Dallaire & Wilson, 2010). These primary stressors of arrest—trauma, stigma, bureaucratic requirements, and anticipatory stress—may worsen relationship quality and coparenting. They may also create greater challenges for families when experienced by individuals with central family roles, such as mothers and residential parents.

Parental arrest may also generate secondary stressors, such as impaired mental health, reduced economic well-being, and material hardship, which take an additional toll on family life. First, the primary stressors associated with arrest described earlier (e.g., stigma, bureaucratic necessities, and anticipatory stress) may impair mental health (Sugie & Turney, 2017). Indeed, stigma can increase mental health problems and lead to behavioral changes such as a retreat from family life (Link & Phelan, 2006). Similarly, the need to appear in court and to fulfill other bureaucratic requirements requires changes to work and childcare schedules, increasing demands on the other parent. And, uncertainty about the future can directly impair mental health (Pearlin & Bierman, 2013). Arrest also entails police contact, which can involve physical searches and denigrating remarks, and can result in long-lasting feelings of powerlessness and disrespect (Lerman & Weaver, 2014). Given that impaired mental health increases the risk of union dissolution, impedes relationship quality, and makes coparenting difficult (e.g., Meadows, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008), it is likely that mental health is a secondary stressor linking the primary stressor of arrest to family life.

Additionally, arrest can lead to the secondary stressor of diminished economic well-being, through reduced income and employment. Although arrests do not indicate culpability (as convictions do), they often signal criminality to the general population, who may not know the difference between arrests and convictions. Arrests can reduce the chances for employment and relegate jobseekers to poorer-quality, lower-paying jobs (Uggen, Vuolo, Lageson, Ruhland, & Whitman, 2014). The salience of arrests for employment and hiring decisions has increased in recent years, given the prevalence of online background checks. Diminished economic well-being is a focal point of family stress theories (e.g., Conger & Elder Jr, 1994; Conger et al., 2002) and is associated with family life (e.g., McLanahan & Percheski, 2008), suggesting that diminished economic circumstances may be a secondary stressor linking arrest to family life.

Finally, arrest can result in the secondary stressor of material hardship, which has deleterious consequences for family life. Material hardship, or the inability to fulfill basic needs and services, is only moderately related to income (e.g., Iceland & Bauman, 2007), since it reflects the balance between resources and expenditures. In addition to income, a family's resources include savings, assets, and the ability to barter goods and services (Beverly, 2001). Resources are offset by a family's expenditures, which depend on a variety of factors, including family size, composition, age, and health. Arrest may not only decrease resources, as discussed earlier, but it may also increase financial costs (e.g., expenditures to fulfill court and bureaucratic obligations) and strain the family's ability

to manage budgets (Schwartz-Soicher, Geller, & Garfinkel, 2011; for a focus on incarceration, see Arditti, 2018). Similar to impaired mental health and reduced economic wellbeing, material hardship may be a secondary stressor linking parental arrest to family life (Gershoff, Aber, Raver, & Lennon, 2007).

Data, Measures, and Analytic Strategy

Data

To understand the consequences of arrest for families, we use data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a longitudinal cohort of 4,898 mostly unmarried parents in urban areas. The data include parents sampled in hospitals across 20 US cities with populations greater than 200,000. Mothers completed the baseline in-person interview at the hospital after the birth of their child, between February 1998 and September 2000, and fathers completed the baseline in-person interview as soon as possible after the birth (Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, & McLanahan, 2001). Mothers and fathers have been re-interviewed five additional times, when their children were 1, 3, 5, 9, and 15 years old (with only primary caregivers interviewed at the last survey wave). In this article, we primarily use data from the first four survey waves.

The Fragile Families data are well positioned to understand the relationship between parental arrest and family life. First, the data include longitudinal measures of both parental arrest and family life, facilitating analytic approaches that examine change over time. Second, the data contain indicators especially associated with arrest, including substance use, impulsive behaviors, and police stops. Third, the sampling frame of mostly unmarried parents in urban areas means that the sample includes parents commonly at risk of arrest. Though these data have been used extensively to consider the link between incarceration and family life, they have not been used to consider the consequences of mothers' or fathers' arrest.

The primary analytic sample comprises 4,074 observations. We exclude the 824 observations missing data on any of the four dependent variables (described later), most of which were missing due to survey attrition and not item nonresponse. There are few baseline differences between the full and primary analytic samples, as parents across both samples have similar distributions of demographic characteristics such as race/ethnicity, age, education, and relationship status. There is one exception, with mothers in the analytic sample less likely to be foreign born than mothers in the full sample (15% compared to 17%, $p < .01$). Descriptive statistics of the sample are presented in Appendix Table A.

Measures

Family Life. We measure family life with four dependent variables, all ascertained at the 5-year survey. First, separation is a binary variable indicating the mother and father are not in a romantic relationship. Second, relationship quality indicates mothers' assessments of their overall relationship with the father (regardless of whether they are currently in a romantic relationship), with response categories ranging from 1 (*poor*) to 5 (*excellent*). Third, shared responsibility is an average of mothers' responses to the following four questions (1 = *never* to 4 = *often*): (a) how often the father looks after child when you need to do things; (b) how often the father runs errands like picking things up from the store; (c) how often the father fixes things around the home, paints, or helps make it look nicer in other ways; and (d) how often the father takes the child places he/she needs to go such as to daycare or the doctor ($\alpha = .93$). Fourth, cooperation is an average of mothers' responses to the following six questions (1 = *never* to 4 = *always*): (a) when father is with child, he acts like the kind of parent you want for your child; (b) you can trust father to take good care of child; (c) father respects the schedules and rules you make for child; (d) father supports you in the way you want to raise child; (e) you and father talk about problems that come up with raising child; (f) you can count on father for help when you need someone to look after child for a few hours ($\alpha = .96$). Outcome variables are based on mothers' reports, as fathers have higher rates of attrition over time.

Parental Arrest. The key independent variables, mothers' arrest and fathers' arrest, are binary variables indicating the mother and father, respectively, reported experiencing an arrest between the 3- and 5-year surveys. These indicators consider mothers and fathers to have experienced an arrest if they answered affirmatively to the following question: "Since the date of the last interview/during the last 2 years, not counting minor traffic offenses, have you ever been booked or charged with breaking a law,

either by the police or by someone connected with the courts?" These indicators also consider mothers and fathers to have experienced an arrest if they were incarcerated in the past 2 years, heeding prior research that suggests using inclusive indicators of criminal justice contact (Geller, Jaeger, & Pace, 2016).

Mental Health, Economic Well-being, and Material Hardship. In some analyses, we consider three sets of mediating variables, all measured at the 5-year survey. Mental health is measured by mothers' and fathers' depression (1 = *major depressive disorder in the past year*). Economic well-being includes mothers' and fathers' full-time employment (1 = *employed 35 or more hours in the past week*) and income-to-poverty ratio (total household income divided by the official poverty threshold set by the U.S. Census Bureau, which accounts for household size). Material hardship is measured by summing mothers' and fathers' reports of 12 binary indicators reflecting whether the parent has experienced an array of various hardships in the past 12 months (e.g., did not pay full amount of rent or mortgage payments).

Control Variables. The multivariate analyses adjust for an array of mothers' and fathers' characteristics associated with arrest and family life, all measured at the baseline, 1-year, or 3-year surveys (and, therefore, prior to arrest). Demographic characteristics include race/ethnicity, foreign-born status, age, family structure in childhood (1 = *lived with both parents at age 15*), and monthly attendance at religious services. Family characteristics include relationship status, repartnership, and number of children in the household. Socioeconomic characteristics include educational attainment, full-time employment, income-to-poverty ratio, material hardship, neighborhood disadvantage, and community involvement. Health characteristics include depression, parenting stress, perceived social support (a sum of six binary indicators about available support during the next year), fair or poor overall health, binge drinking (1 = *four or more drinks in one sitting in past month*), and drug use (1 = *used drugs in past month*). We also adjust for domestic violence (1 = *reports being hit, slapped, or kicked by other parent since baseline*), impulsivity (e.g., I will often say whatever comes into my head without thinking first), cognitive ability (measured by the Weschler Adult Intelligence Scale), and criminal justice contact prior to the 3-year survey (measured by three binary variables: ever stopped by the police [but not picked up or arrested, excluding minor traffic violations], ever arrested, and ever incarcerated).

Analytic Strategy

Importantly, criminal justice contact—such as arrest—is not randomly distributed across the population but is instead most prevalent among men, racial/ethnic minorities, and those with less educational attainment (Brame et al., 2014; Lerman & Weaver, 2014). Moreover, arrest is also more likely among individuals who are not married, have lower socioeconomic status, have less self-control, and have prior criminal justice contact (Pratt & Cullen, 2000). And, though there has been a decoupling of offending behavior and arrest over time, criminal activity commonly precedes arrest (Weaver, Papachristos, & Zanger-Tishler, 2019). In particular, women's pathways to arrest are shaped by addiction and turbulent relationships (Giordano, 2010). Therefore, we account for differences between families that do and do not experience parental arrest with various analytic approaches.

Our analytic strategy proceeds in three stages. In the first stage, we estimate the relationship between arrest and family life with a series of linear probability models (for estimates of separation) and ordinary least squares regression models (for estimates of other outcomes) with robust standard errors. Importantly, all estimates of separation are restricted to the 2,320 mothers in a romantic relationship with the child's father at the 3-year survey. In this stage, the first model presents the association between parental arrest (between the 3- and 5-year surveys) and the four measures of family life (at the 5-year survey): separation, relationship quality, shared responsibility, and cooperation. This and all subsequent models adjust for mothers' and fathers' recent incarceration (measured between the 3- and 5-year surveys) to ensure that the estimates of the relationship between arrest and family life are *net* of contemporaneously measured incarceration. Adjusting for recent incarceration also accounts for the fact that some mothers, especially those with limited economic resources, will spend time in pretrial detention following an arrest (Reaves, 2013). The second model additionally adjusts for the control

variables described earlier. The third model further adjusts for mothers' and fathers' reports of being stopped by the police between the 3- and 5-year surveys, which captures some characteristics associated with selection into arrest. We consider this third model a conservative estimate, as police stops may be endogenous to arrest.

We also include a fourth model that uses individual-level fixed-effects regression to estimate the relationship between changes in arrest and changes in family life between the 5- and 9-year surveys. The sample for this analysis comprises the 3,150 observations that participated in both the 5- and 9-year surveys (as these are the two waves that mothers report on their arrest since the last survey). Although the fixed effects models use a different analytic sample, as compared to the primary analytic sample that experiences substantially less attrition, they account for unobserved time-stable differences between parents who are and are not arrested, strengthening the rigor of the analytic approach.

In the second stage, we estimate the relationship between arrest and family life separately for two groups: (a) parents living together at the 3-year survey (and, therefore, immediately prior to the measure of arrest) and (b) parents not living together at the 3-year survey. We test for statistically significant differences across groups (Paternoster, Brame, Mazerolle, & Piquero, 1998).

In the third stage, we consider three sets of mechanisms that may link arrest to family life: (a) mothers' and fathers' mental health, (b) mothers' and fathers' economic well-being, and (c) mothers' and fathers' material hardship. We decompose the relationship between arrest and family life into a direct effect of arrest and an indirect effect of arrest (VanderWeele, 2016). We simultaneously fit two models for each proposed mediator; the first model estimates the outcome variable as a function of parental arrest, the mediator, and the control variables (including indicators of the mediators measured prior to parental arrest), and the second model estimates the mediator as a function of parental arrest and the control variables (Emsley & Liu, 2013).

Most variables, including all variables reported by mothers, are missing fewer than 10% of observations. Missing data are more common among variables reported by fathers (due to attrition among fathers at the 3-year survey, when most control variables are measured). We preserve observations by producing 20 multiply imputed data sets, using the multivariate normal method, and pool results across these data sets.

Results

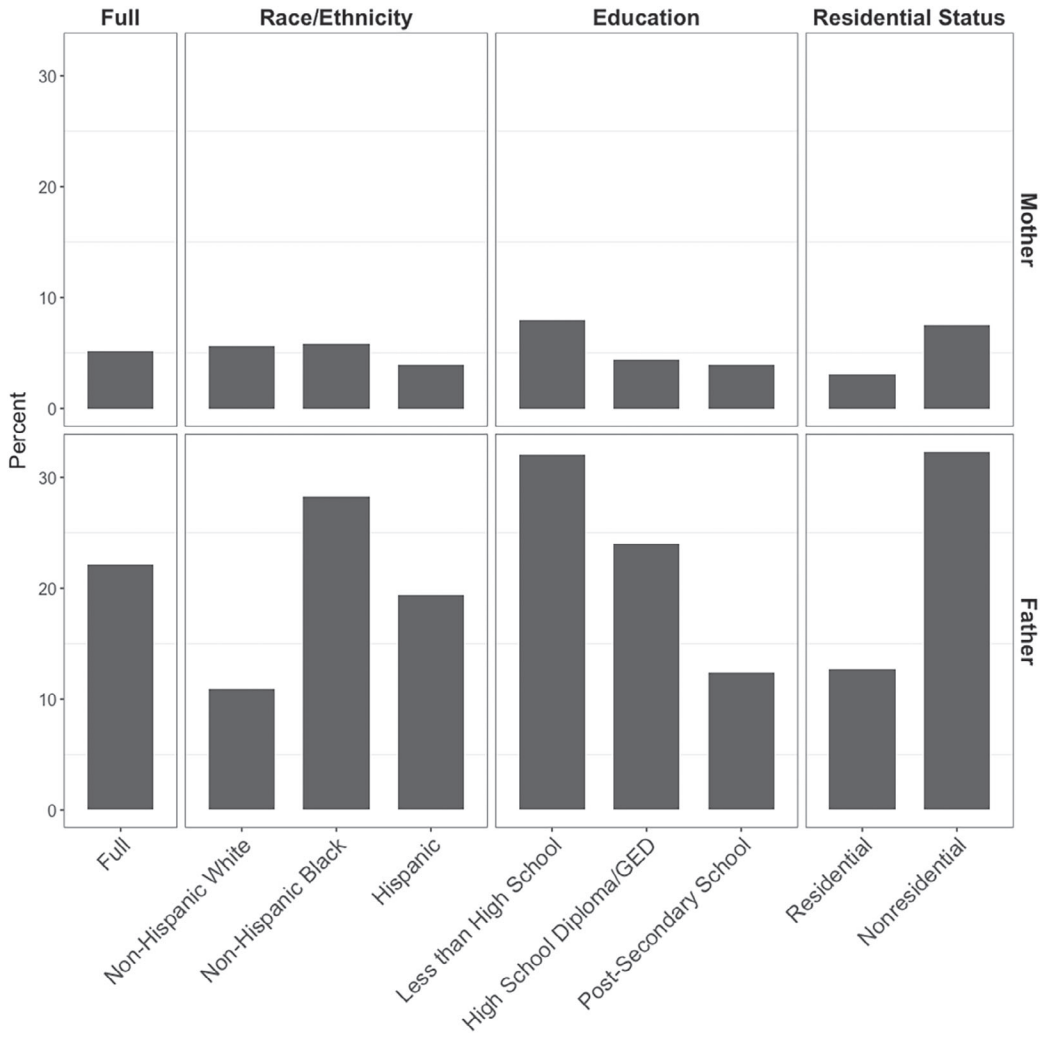
Social Patterning of Parental Arrest

We first examine how exposure to family stressors is differential, based on status positions within the social structure. Figure 2 displays frequencies of recent arrest—an arrest occurring between the 3- and 5-year surveys—for parents across an array of status positions. First, mothers experienced much lower, but still notable, rates of recent arrest compared to fathers (5.2% compared to 22.1%). Second, unlike fathers' arrest, mothers' arrest was more similarly distributed across racial/ethnic groups, with 5.6% of non-Hispanic White, 5.8% of non-Hispanic Black, and 3.9% of Hispanic mothers recently arrested. Third, similar to fathers, mothers with lower educational attainment were more likely to experience recent arrest. For example, 8.0% of mothers without a high school diploma or GED reported a recent arrest compared to 3.9% of mothers with postsecondary school. Fourth, mothers not residing with the father prior to the 3-year survey were also more likely to experience arrest, with 7.5% of nonresidential mothers recently arrested compared to 3.1% of residential mothers.

Family Life as a Function of Parental Arrest

A stressor experienced by one individual can proliferate to the entire family unit. We consider this possibility in Table 1, which presents the coefficients for mothers' and fathers' arrest from regression models that estimate family life as a function of parental arrest (see Appendix Table B for full tables). Model 1 shows that both mothers' and fathers' arrest, net of mothers' and fathers' incarceration, were associated with all four indicators of family life. Mothers arrested between the 3- and 5-year surveys, compared to mothers not arrested, experienced increases in separation from the father at the 5-year survey ($b = 0.216$, $p < .05$). Mothers' arrest was also associated with lower relationship quality ($b = -0.630$, $p < .001$), less shared responsibility ($b = -0.438$, $p < .001$), and less cooperation ($b = -0.479$, $p < .001$). Similarly, though the magnitude of the coefficients for fathers' arrest

Figure 2. Frequencies of Parental Arrest, for Full Sample and by Subgroups.



were smaller than those for mothers' arrest, fathers' arrest was associated with higher separation ($b = 0.118$, $p < .05$), lower relationship quality ($b = -0.353$, $p < .01$), less shared responsibility ($b = -0.278$, $p < .01$), and less cooperation ($b = -0.177$, $p < .10$).

Model 2 adjusts for an array of characteristics associated with arrest and family life. Mothers' arrest remained positively and significantly associated with separation ($b = 0.175$, $p < .05$). It also remained marginally significantly associated with lower relationship quality ($b = -0.254$, $p < .10$, which translates into one-sixth of an *SD*) and significantly associated with less cooperation ($b = -0.227$, $p < .05$, which translates into one-fifth of an *SD*). The association between mothers' arrest and shared responsibility fell from statistical significance. Importantly, these associations were net of mothers' and fathers' recent incarceration; in fact, any associations between mothers' incarceration and family life were modest and statistically nonsignificant once accounting for arrest (see Appendix Table C). Furthermore, Model 2 shows fathers' arrest was not significantly associated with the outcomes, suggesting the observed associations in Model 1 resulted from factors correlated with arrest.

Table 1. *Estimating Family Outcomes as a Function of Parental Arrest*

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	parental arrest		+ controls		+ police stops		fixed effects	
	b	(*SE*)	*b*	(*SE*)	*b*	(*SE*)	*b*	(*SE*)
A. Separation ($N = 2{,}320$)								
Mother arrest	0.216	(0.088)*	0.175	(0.082)*	0.173	(0.083)*	0.151	(0.063)*
Father arrest	0.118	(0.051)*	0.046	(0.105)	0.023	(0.053)	0.029	(0.040)
B. Relationship quality ($N = 4{,}074$)								
Mother arrest	−0.630	(0.148)***	−0.254	(0.139)†	−0.255	(0.139)†	−0.393	(0.106)***
Father arrest	−0.353	(0.116)**	−0.049	(0.096)	−0.039	(0.098)	−0.048	(0.078)
C. Shared responsibility in parenting ($N = 4{,}074$)								
Mother arrest	−0.438	(0.120)***	−0.107	(0.103)	−0.110	(0.103)	−0.151	(0.078)†
Father arrest	−0.278	(0.099)**	−0.051	(0.079)	−0.055	(0.080)	0.047	(0.057)
D. Cooperation in parenting ($N = 4{,}074$)								
Mother arrest	−0.479	(0.132)***	−0.227	(0.108)*	−0.232	(0.109)*	−0.258	(0.078)**
Father arrest	−0.177	(0.094)†	0.014	(0.074)	0.013	(0.074)	−0.028	(0.064)

Notes. Linear probability models estimate separation. Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models estimate the other three outcomes. Coefficients presented, with robust *SEs* in parentheses. Model 1 includes variables for mothers' and fathers' arrest, as well as mothers' and fathers' recent incarceration. Model 2 adjusts for all mother- and father-reported characteristics in Appendix Table A. Model 3 adjusts for all variables in Model 2 plus mother- and father-reported police stops at the 5-year survey. Model 4 estimates fixed effects regression models to examine the relationship between changes in parental arrest and changes in family life between the 5- and 9-year surveys (588 person-years for estimates of separation and 6,300 person-year for estimates of relationship quality, shared responsibility in parenting, and cooperation in parenting). These fixed effects models adjust for all time-varying covariates.

$\dagger p < .10$, $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$.

Model 3 further adjusts for police stops (that do not lead to an arrest) between the 3- and 5-year surveys. This model shows results consistent with Model 2, with mothers' but not fathers' arrest being substantively and significantly associated with family life. Finally, Model 4 presents estimates from the fixed effects models. These models show that changes in mothers' arrest was positively associated with changes in separation ($b = 0.151$, $p < .05$) and negatively associated with changes in relationship quality ($b = -0.393$, $p < .001$), shared responsibility ($b = -0.151$, $p < .10$), and cooperation ($b = -0.258$, $p < .01$). These models also show no association between changes in fathers' arrest and changes in family life.

The preceding models examine mothers' and fathers' arrests separately; however, experiencing both parents' arrests during the same time period may be especially detrimental to family life. It may also be the case that mothers' arrest is more consequential because it reflects a concurrent arrest of the father. Indeed, when mothers were arrested between the 3- and 5-year surveys, 47.8% of fathers were also arrested during this time. In supplemental analyses, we examined whether concurrent experiences have additionally negative repercussions for parental relationships by including an interaction between mothers' arrest and fathers' arrest; this interaction term did not approach statistical significance ($p = .953$ for estimates of separation, $p = .369$ for relationship quality, $p = .298$ for shared responsibility, and $p = .194$ for cooperation). Experiencing arrests concurrently was not more detrimental to family life than experiencing arrests separately and, considered together with the main models, these models suggest that mothers' arrest alone, and not fathers' arrest, impairs family life.

In additional supplemental analyses, we considered whether the associations are more deleterious for racial/ethnic minorities and those with lower educational attainment. First, we find some evidence that the relationship between mothers' arrest and separation was largest among non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic mothers. However, these coefficients were not statistically different from the coefficients for non-Hispanic White mothers and the differences did not persist across the other three outcomes. Fathers' arrest is not associated with family life across race/ethnicity (see Appendix Table D). Second, we find the magnitude of the association between mothers' arrest and family life was largest among those with less than a high school diploma (compared to those with a high school diploma or those with postsecondary

Table 2. *Estimating Family Outcomes as a Function of Parental Arrest, by Prior Residential Status*

	Residential at 3-year survey		Nonresidential at 3-year survey	
	b	(*SE*)	*b*	(*SE*)
A. Separation				
Mother arrest	0.161	(0.091)†	–	–
B. Relationship quality				
Mother arrest	−0.747	(0.249)**	−0.030	(0.153)
C. Shared responsibility in parenting				
Mother arrest	−0.296	(0.176)†	−0.009	(0.118)
D. Cooperation in parenting				
Mother arrest	−0.341	(0.191)†	−0.189	(0.139)
N	2,091–2,116		1,958–1,983	

Notes. Linear probability models estimate separation. Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models estimate the other three outcomes. Coefficients presented, with robust *SEs* in parentheses. Models adjust for all variables in Model 2 of Table 1. Estimates of separation are limited to those in a romantic relationship with the child's father at the 3-year survey; therefore, there are not enough observations in the nonresidential group to compute reliable estimates.

†$p < .10$, *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$.

education), indicating mothers' arrest was most consequential when it occurred among mothers with lower educational attainment. The coefficients between those with less than a high school diploma and those with a high school diploma or GED were statistically significant for estimates of separation. The coefficients between those with less than a high school diploma and those with postsecondary education were statistically significant for estimates of relationship quality and shared responsibility. Fathers' arrest was not associated with family life across educational attainment (see Appendix Table E).

Family Life as a Function of Parental Arrest, by Prior Coresidence

Next, we examine whether between-person stress proliferation—the transfer of a stressor from the individual to the family unit—depends on an individual's residential status. We present estimates of family life separately for parents living together at the 3-year survey and parents not living together at the 3-year survey. Here and in subsequent tables, we display estimates of mothers' arrest for presentation purposes (even though fathers' arrest is included as a variable in the models) given that prior analyses show no significant association between fathers' arrest and family life, adjusting for all control variables (the equivalent of Model 2 of Table 1). The association between fathers' arrest and family life was statistically nonsignificant among residential and nonresidential parents.

For residential parents, there were statistically significant differences in family life between mothers who do and do not experience arrest. Mothers' arrest was positively associated with separation ($b = 0.161$, $p < .10$). It was also negatively associated with relationship quality ($b = -0.747$, $p < .01$), shared responsibility ($b = -0.296$, $p < .10$), and less cooperation ($b = -0.341$, $p < .10$). For nonresidential parents, we consider only the latter three outcomes since there are not enough observations to compute reliable estimates of separation. These analyses document small and statistically nonsignificant associations between mothers' arrest and relationship quality, shared responsibility, and cooperation. *Z*-tests of equality show that the differences between coefficients for residential and nonresidential parents for relationship quality ($z = -2.435$)—but not shared responsibility ($z = -1.354$) or cooperation ($z = -0.643$)—were statistically significant (Table 2).

We considered the intersection of residential status and race/ethnicity and the intersection of residential status and educational attainment in supplemental analyses. The results showed that the relationship between mothers' and fathers' arrest and family life was similar across all race/ethnic and residential status subgroups (Appendix Table F). The results also showed that the relationship between mothers' arrest and family life was concentrated among residential parents with less than a high school education (Appendix Table G). In both sets of analyses,

the sample sizes for the subgroups are small; therefore, statistical nonsignificance should be interpreted cautiously.

Mechanisms Linking Parental Arrest and Family Life

Primary stressors can proliferate to facilitate additional stressors that together relate to family life. We consider this possibility in Table 3, which presents results that examine how the primary stressor of arrest may initiate the following secondary stressors, or mechanisms: (a) changes in mental health, (b) changes in economic wellbeing, and (c) changes in material hardship. We focus our attention on mechanisms linking mothers' arrest to separation, relationship quality, and cooperation, as these associations were statistically significant in Table 1.

Mothers' material hardship explained some of the association between mothers' arrest and family life. Mothers' material hardship explained 17% of the total effect on separation (indirect effect: $b = 0.029$, $p < .01$), 33% of the total effect on relationship quality (indirect effect: $b = -0.084$, $p < .001$), and 12% of the total effect on cooperation (indirect effect: $b = -0.028$, $p < .05$). The other proposed mechanisms did not explain a statistically significant portion of the association between mothers' arrest and family life. Additionally, these mediation analyses were consistent when restricting the sample to parents living together at the 3-year survey.

Discussion

The criminal justice system has become a central force in structuring inequality in the contemporary United States. Arrest is one form of criminal justice contact that is both common and consequential. We situate parental arrest within a family stress framework and suggest that arrest is a stressor related to essential aspects of family life including union dissolution, relationship quality, and coparenting. We highlight two key features of the family stress framework by integrating them within the broader context of social inequality (Arditti, 2016, 2018; Conger et al., 2002; Hill, 1958). First, stressors within the family are unequally distributed and depend on status positions. Second, processes of stress proliferation, which are also shaped by status positions, influence family outcomes. Stressors can proliferate from one individual to the broader family unit and they can proliferate to create additional stressors, which together with the initial stressor impair family life. We test this family stress framework by investigating how one relatively common (yet understudied) family stressor, parental arrest, is associated with family life by using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study and a series of rigorous modeling strategies that pay attention to nonrandom selection into experiencing arrest.

Following the family stress model, the results indicate two conclusions. First, the stressor of parental arrest is both common and unequally distributed across the population. Certain groups are more likely than others to experience parental arrest. Fathers are more than four times as likely as mothers to have been arrested in the past 2 years, and nonresidential parents are more than four times as likely as residential parents to have been arrested in the past 2 years. In other words, family structure is a demographic characteristic that is closely connected to unequal exposure to parental arrest. There are also differences by educational attainment, with arrest being more common among those without a high school diploma than among those with postsecondary education. We find that the prevalence of arrest is similar for non-Hispanic White, non-Hispanic Black, and Hispanic women, consistent with nationally representative estimates (Brame et al., 2014). These findings call for intersectional approaches when interrogating theories of stress, where status positions depend on overlapping relationships among gender, race/ethnicity, education, and other dimensions.

Second, consistent with a family stress model that connects processes of stress proliferation with status positions, we find that the stressor of mothers' arrest, but not fathers' arrest, has consequences for the broader family unit via its association with union dissolution, relationship quality, and coparenting. These associations persist across modeling strategies designed to strengthen causal inference, including those that adjust for observed characteristics associated with selection into arrest (e.g., prior criminal justice contact, impulsive behaviors, substance abuse), lagged dependent variables, and contemporaneously measured incarceration; those that adjust for contemporaneously measured police stops; and those that adjust for time-stable unobserved characteristics.

Table 3. *Estimating Direct and Indirect Effects of Mothers' Arrest on Family Outcomes*

	Direct effect		Indirect effect		Total effect		Percent of total effect mediated
	b	(*SE*)	*b*	(*SE*)	*b*	(*SE*)	
A. Separation							
Mother depression	0.164	(0.069)*	0.007	(0.005)	0.171	(0.073)*	4%
Father depression	0.178	(0.070)*	−0.002	(0.003)	0.176	(0.083)*	−1%
Mother full-time employment	0.176	(0.069)*	−0.003	(0.008)	0.174	(0.071)*	−2%
Father full-time employment	0.175	(0.070)*	0.000	(0.004)	0.175	(0.070)*	0%
Mother income-to-poverty ratio	0.171	(0.069)*	0.004	(0.001)	0.175	(0.070)*	2%
Father income-to-poverty ratio	0.173	(0.069)*	0.002	(0.006)	0.175	(0.070)*	1%
Mother material hardship	0.146	(0.070)*	0.029	(0.010)**	0.175	(0.070)*	17%
Father material hardship	0.175	(0.070)*	0.000	(0.002)	0.175	(0.070)*	0%
B. Relationship quality							
Mother depression	−0.213	(0.128)†	−0.030	(0.020)	−0.246	(0.135)†	12%
Father depression	−0.260	(0.127)*	0.004	(0.006)	−0.257	(0.140)†	−2%
Mother full-time employment	−0.255	(0.128)*	0.001	(0.003)	−0.254	(0.128)*	0%
Father full-time employment	−0.249	(0.128)†	−0.009	(0.012)	−0.255	(0.128)*	4%
Mother income-to-poverty ratio	−0.246	(0.127)†	−0.008	(0.008)	−0.254	(0.128)*	3%
Father income-to-poverty ratio	−0.252	(0.128)*	−0.002	(0.006)	−0.254	(0.128)*	1%
Mother material hardship	−0.170	(0.128)	−0.084	(0.019)***	−0.254	(0.128)*	33%
Father material hardship	−0.251	(0.128)*	−0.003	(0.007)	−0.254	(0.128)*	1%
C. Shared responsibility in parenting							
Mother depression	−0.087	(0.097)	−0.016	(0.008)*	−0.102	(0.099)	16%
Father depression	−0.110	(0.097)	0.002	(0.004)	−0.108	(0.103)	−2%
Mother full-time employment	−0.106	(0.097)	−0.001	(0.002)	−0.109	(0.098)	1%
Father full-time employment	−0.102	(0.097)	−0.005	(0.006)	−0.107	(0.097)	5%
Mother income-to-poverty ratio	−0.101	(0.097)	−0.006	(0.006)	−0.107	(0.097)	6%
Father income-to-poverty ratio	−0.105	(0.097)	−0.002	(0.004)	−0.107	(0.097)	2%
Mother material hardship	−0.065	(0.097)	−0.061	(0.085)	−0.107	(0.097)	57%
Father material hardship	−0.105	(0.097)	−0.001	(0.004)	−0.107	(0.097)	1%
D. Cooperation in parenting							
Mother depression	−0.212	(0.094)*	−0.012	(0.017)	−0.224	(0.095)*	5%
Father depression	−0.230	(0.093)*	0.001	(0.003)	−0.227	(0.094)*	0%
Mother full-time employment	−0.227	(0.094)*	0.000	(0.001)	−0.227	(0.094)*	0%
Father full-time employment	−0.223	(0.094)*	−0.004	(0.007)	−0.228	(0.094)*	2%
Mother income-to-poverty ratio	−0.224	(0.094)*	−0.003	(0.004)	−0.227	(0.094)*	1%
Father income-to-poverty ratio	−0.227	(0.094)*	0.000	(0.002)	−0.227	(0.094)*	0%
Mother material hardship	−0.199	(0.094)*	−0.028	(0.011)*	−0.227	(0.094)*	12%
Father material hardship	−0.223	(0.094)*	−0.001	(0.003)	−0.227	(0.094)*	0%

Notes. Linear probability models estimate separation. Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models estimate the other three outcomes. Coefficients for mothers' arrest presented. All models adjust for variables in Model 2 of Table 1. These analyses are implemented with the paramed macro in Stata. This macro does not allow for robust *SEs*, which partly explains the slight differences in the coefficients from Table 1 and the total effect coefficients presented here. These slight differences also stem from the fact that the total effect is estimated by summing the direct and indirect effects, rather than being calculated directly from a regression model.

†$p < .10$, *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

In the second type of stress proliferation, we find that the stressor of mothers' arrest influences family life by creating additional stressors that, in conjunction with arrest, have deleterious consequences. Specifically, the association between mothers' arrest and family life can be partially explained by changes in material hardship. Mothers' arrest increases material hardship, increasing family financial expenditures and straining the family's ability to manage economically, which has reverberating consequences for families. The family

stress model, with its attention to the interconnections between primary and secondary stressors, is important because it helps to explain *how* stressors, such as parental arrest, impair family life.

The findings raise at least two important questions for future research. First, why is mothers' arrest, but not fathers' arrest, so consequential to family life? We suggest that the deleterious consequences of stressors for family life depend on one's position within the family, where stressors affecting individuals presumably more central to family functioning (such as mothers or residential parents) are most consequential to family life (Pearlin & Turner, 1987). These important internal roles within the family may explain the greater consequences of mothers' arrest for family life.

Apart from the closeness of individuals to families prior to arrest, there may be other factors that explain why mothers' arrest is deleterious to family life. First, the stressors of arrest may be more acute for mothers given their position as women involved in the criminal justice system. As a comparatively rare occurrence, women who are arrested may experience more shame and stigma compared to their male counterparts. Second, the reasons for women's arrest are often different from the reasons for men's arrest, in ways that increase the salience of arrest for family life. Arrests for fraud (such as welfare), although minor among women's arrest rates overall, is one example that carries additional consequences for families' impaired economic well-being and material hardship (Gustafson, 2011; Snyder, 2012). Third, mothers' arrest may be harmful to family relationships not only because it engenders strain across and between family members but also because it is associated with fewer external supports to buffer against these negative experiences. Drawing from both the original pillars of family stress theories and the stress process paradigm, a family's stress buffering resources often moderate the association between stressors and family functioning (Pearlin, 1989). Families that experience mothers' arrest, in particular, may have varying abilities to harness resources to protect against the deleterious consequences of stressors (Hill, 1958). Data constraints preclude an empirical examination of the reasons for mothers' and fathers' arrest; however, future research should shed light on these possible explanations.

A second question is why mothers' arrest, but not mothers' incarceration, is negatively associated with family life. Prior research that documents deleterious associations between incarceration—including maternal incarceration—and family life typically conceptualizes incarceration as the combined influence of arrest, conviction, and incarceration (Turney & Wildeman, 2018). The findings in this study correspond with recent evidence that arrest itself, apart from other criminal justice stages of conviction and incarceration, has negative associations for individuals (Sugie & Turney, 2017) and their family relationships. Mothers' arrest may be consequential for family life, net of mothers' incarceration, because arrest is an instigating factor that suddenly disrupts families, creates future uncertainty, and necessitates change in anticipation of later criminal justice consequences. Indeed, mothers are more likely to be residing with their children when an arrest occurs; when incarceration happens, children have often already been moved to nonmaternal caregivers (Poehlmann, Shlafer, Maes, & Hanneman, 2008).

Overall, in line with other research on arrest (e.g., Kohler-Hausmann, 2013; Lerman & Weaver, 2014; Sugie & Turney, 2017), the findings suggest that the stressors of arrest—for example, trauma, stigma, bureaucratic requirements, and anticipatory stress—are consequential for family relationships. This nascent scholarship brings attention to the myriad of ways that arrest and other more minor forms of criminal justice contact, which are relatively less observable compared to penalty of incarceration, influence individuals and families.

Limitations

We used the best available data to examine the relationship between parental arrest and family life. However, several limitations should be kept in mind. First, the observational data preclude causal conclusions. Though we employed rigorous analytic strategies to isolate the relationship between arrest and family life, there may be time-varying unobserved characteristic (e.g., violent behavior) that would render the relationship spurious. Second, the sample comprises parents living in urban areas. Arrests among parents and nonparents, as well as among those living in urban, suburban, and rural areas, may be differentially consequential for families. Third,

many of the measures are based on self-reported answers from mothers. Self-reports may contain more error than measures based on other types of information. For example, given the stigma associated with arrest, measures of criminal justice contact from administrative records may be more precise. Future research that improves on these limitations is necessary.

Conclusions

Taken together, this article contributes to research on criminal justice contact, family life, and inequality in several ways. Theoretically, we highlight how models of family stress can integrate aspects of social inequality to understand stress exposure and proliferation. Stressors are unequally distributed across the population and are often concentrated among those in disadvantaged social positions, suggesting that stressors that are consequential for families are also consequential for social inequality. We use arrest as an empirical touchstone, but we suggest that scholars test this theory with other family stressors related to the criminal justice system (e.g., parole or probation). Empirically, we provide the first accounting of the consequences of arrest, a relatively common but understudied family stressor, for aspects of family life. We document that mothers' arrest—but not fathers' arrest—has deleterious consequences for family life, that these associations are concentrated among residential parents, and that material hardship explains some of these associations. Taken together, this expanded family stress model suggests that unequal exposure to stressors and differential consequences of stressors can increase inequality between families.

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Supporting Information

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

Appendix S1: Supporting Information

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