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**Experiences of, and attitudes towards, pregnancy and fatherhood amongst  
incarcerated young male offenders: findings from a qualitative study**

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## **Abstract**

Teenage parenthood is problematised in the UK. Attention is increasingly falling on the potential or actual father yet we still know relatively little about young men's experiences and attitudes in this area. This paper focuses on the experiences of, and attitudes towards, pregnancy and fatherhood amongst a sample of men incarcerated in a Scottish Young Offender Institute. In-depth interviews were conducted with 40 inmates, aged 16 – 20, purposively sampled using answers from a questionnaire administered to 67 inmates. Twelve men reported eighteen pregnancies for which they were, definitely or possibly, responsible. All but one of the pregnancies were unplanned. Five of the men were fathers: two were still in a relationship with the mother of their child and were in close contact with her and the child while incarcerated, three, all of whom had separated from their partner before the birth, had had patchy contact with mother and child before and/or during their sentence. All five of the men expressed a strong desire to be 'a good father'. Amongst the interview sample as a whole, most said they did not feel ready to become fathers. The main reason given was being unable to fulfil what they regarded as the key role of financial provider. Most of the men had given little or no thought to the possibility of a sexual partner becoming pregnant. Contraceptive use was high, however, amongst the minority who reported thinking about this possibility. The paper concludes by considering the cultural context of the men's attitudes and the potential for intervention development for incarcerated male young offenders in the areas of Sex and Relationships Education and parenting.

## Introduction

Parenting, it has been asserted, may be the most important public health issue facing society (Hoghghi, 1998). The quality and style of parents' care of their children is widely accepted as central to understanding a variety of health outcomes (Hoghghi, 1998). In this context teenage parents have been problematised in the UK in recent decades. It has been noted that teen parents are more likely than adult parents to suffer deprivation born from economic disadvantage, poor living conditions, or personal disadvantage such as illness or lack of love from care-givers when growing up (see Welshman, 2007). Fears that such deprivation is transmitted through successive generations as a result of early childbearing (see Social Exclusion Unit, 1999) have heightened concern. Questions have arisen as to the quality of emotional care young, and particularly young, single parents, can offer. Attention on all these dimensions has tended to fix predominantly, or entirely, on the female partner in the pregnancy/parenthood coupling (see Ferguson & Hogan, 2004) the male partner was barely mentioned in the key report published on teenage pregnancy by the UK Social Exclusion Unit a decade ago (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999). Increasingly, however, the (potential) father is becoming a concern for researchers and practitioners. 'Good (enough) parenting', by both the mother and the father, is currently seen as a solution to many of the ills of society (Social Exclusion Unit, 2005). There is growing evidence of the positive influence of fathers' *engagement* (defined as 'direct contact, such as play, reading, outings or care-giving activities') on offsprings' social, behavioural and psychological outcomes (Sarkadi, Kristiansson, Oberklaid & Bremberg, 2007). Indeed, that systematic review found that fathers' engagement

reduces the frequency of behavioural problems in boys and decreases criminality and economic disadvantage in low SES families.

Interest in the male partner's role in the lead up to the conception of a teenage pregnancy, as well as in his role during the pregnancy, has also been growing (see Marsiglio, Ries, Sonenstein, Troccoli, & Whitehead, 2006). We still know much less, however, about the mechanisms, motivations and attitudes involved in young men's, rather than young women's, involvement in pregnancy and parenthood, as reflected in searches of bibliographic data-bases. Work on men in this area has often included only those who identify as fathers, imminent or actual, and have accessed services under this identity (e.g. Quinton, Pollock & Golding, 2002). Accessing (potential) fathers in the community, particularly those who may not be accompanying their (ex)partner to pre and post natal health services, as may be the case for many teenage fathers, is fraught with difficulties. This has exacerbated the tendency to focus on the female in such circumstances.

This paper focuses on a group of young men at high risk of perpetuating deprivation, those incarcerated in a Young Offender Institute (YOI). It examines experiences of pregnancy and fatherhood within this sample, as well as attitudes towards these events. Socially excluded, these men and their peers are often hard to reach within the community yet they have been identified as a priority group in addressing health inequalities (Marshall, Simpson & Stevens, 2000), including in the area of sexual and reproductive health (Stewart, 2007). There is a high rate of sexual partner change during spells outside YOIs and the high prevalence of drug and alcohol use amongst this population has been linked to risky sexual behaviour (Stewart, 2007). Although

the prison authorities do not routinely collect data on the fatherhood status of inmates, it has been estimated that at least one in four incarcerated young offenders is a father (MacMillan, 2005). There is evidence that young fathers in prison are more likely than other young fathers to have received disruptive parenting, lacking in love, guidance or consistency. This has left this population at increased risk of intergenerational transmission of harsh or abusive parenting (Tan & Quinlivan, 2006). There is also a weighty literature on desistance from recidivism which points to the protective quality of 'social bonds', including those arising from the offender valuing, and being valued as, a part of a family unit (e.g. Farrall, 2002). Literature on young offenders who are fathers is, however, sparse (Meek, 2007).

This paper draws on a largely qualitative study of incarcerated young offenders' experiences of, and attitudes towards, a range of issues pertinent to their sexual and reproductive health (Buston, 2008). Data were gathered on their experiences and attitudes in the area of pregnancy and fatherhood. The men were asked whether they had been responsible for any pregnancies and, if they had, were questioned about their experiences after learning a partner had become pregnant, and about their role as fathers if the pregnancy continued to birth. Amongst those who did not report a partner's pregnancy, their hypothetical attitudes to such an event were explored, as were their feelings about becoming a parent. What can these data tell us about conceptualisations of fatherhood amongst this potentially disaffected group of Scottish men in the early twenty-first century? To what extent are these conceptualisations a product of the dominant cultural values of the time and place? Findings are also discussed in relation to the development of YOI-based interventions in the areas of Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) and parenting.

## **Methods**

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University of Glasgow's Faculty of Law, Business and Social Science Ethical Committee, and from the Scottish Prison Service (SPS) Research Access and Ethics Committee. The process of gaining permission to conduct research within the YOI was lengthy. Permission was given to survey and interview the men, on a one-to-one basis. Access to prison records was not requested though it is acknowledged that such triangulation would have added further depth to findings. Interviews with the (ex)partners of the men, and particularly the mothers of their children, would also have added an extremely elucidating dimension, but this was also beyond the scope of the study.

YOIs in Scotland house men aged 16 to 21 years. This study was sited in one of Scotland's two YOIs. This particular YOI houses prisoners classified as 'low risk' in terms of harming themselves or others. Inmates had all spent some time in Scotland's other YOI before being transferred to this relatively open facility. All new admissions over a period of eight months were approached to participate in the study, as were those in contact with a prison officer who was involved in supporting the men in work placements, over this period. Because all but one of those approached agreed to take part, and because the men had entered the prison system at a variety of time points, there is no reason to suppose that those surveyed are not representative of the population of this YOI with regard to their offending behaviour, their sexual

behaviour and other characteristics though no data providing clear evidence on this were collected.

Between February and October 2007, I administered questionnaires to 67 inmates, aged 16 – 21 years, and conducted in-depth interviews with 40 of these men. The interview and questionnaire covered topics such as sex education and Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) as well as experiences of, and attitudes towards, pregnancy and fatherhood. The men's questionnaire answers were examined and those with characteristics felt to be of particular interest were approached. This was done in a pragmatic way, with the ultimate aim of achieving a mixed sample with regard to how they rated the sex education they had received, whether or not they had spent time in residential care, and whether or not they reported always or usually using contraception, or rarely or never doing so. Though the interview sample is fairly representative of the questionnaire sample it slightly over-represents those who assessed their school sex education positively, and slightly under-represents those who say they never or rarely use contraception. The interview sample was designed to include several of those who were fathers, or who had 'got a girl pregnant' with other outcomes; and/or who had been STI tested, including those who reported having received a positive diagnosis. Table 1 shows the characteristics of those interviewed.

**TABLE 1 HERE**

All the interviews were conducted in private in a room within the YOI. The interviews were audio-recorded. They averaged one hour in length. They were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriber and the young men were given pseudonyms. Framework Analysis was used to analyse the data (Pope, Ziebland &



Mays, 2000). The Framework method is designed for qualitative data, enabling iterative systematic analysis which allows for new concepts emerging throughout the analytical process. First, descriptive analysis was undertaken focusing on classifying the data and making sense of what was happening in relation to particular areas within the data-set. In the first instance the data were coded according to the areas I had set out to explore at the start of the study, for example the men's attitudes towards STIs, as well as areas relating to pregnancy and fatherhood. This was used as a base in order to move on to higher explanatory accounts which identified patterns and linkages in the data and developed explanations. These were tested against all the relevant data. NVivo6 software was used to code the data (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2002).

## **Results**

First, the experiences and attitudes of the men within the sample who were experienced with pregnancy and/or fatherhood are discussed. This is followed by an exploration of the experiences and attitudes of the men who had not had such experiences.

### **Experience of pregnancy and fatherhood**

The accounts of the men who reported responsibility for a pregnancy in a partner are examined below, focusing on their reported reactions to the pregnancy or pregnancies, and their experience of miscarriage and of fatherhood. Particular attention is then given to the small number of men who can be described as repeat procreators.

Twelve men reported eighteen pregnancies for which they were, definitely or possibly, responsible. Four of the men were responsible for ten of these pregnancies. According to the men, all but one of the eighteen pregnancies were unplanned; five pregnancies went to term; six pregnancies ended in miscarriage (two of the men had experienced two miscarriages by the same partners); two pregnancies, by the same man but with different women, were terminated; and another man reported telling the woman with whom he had conceived a pregnancy to have a termination but as no more contact followed it is not known whether or not she did. Three of the men said they were unsure whether a pregnancy in an (ex) partner was theirs, and one young man reported being unsure whether his girlfriend had become pregnant and miscarried shortly afterwards, or whether she had not been pregnant at all. Twelve of the pregnancies occurred in what the men described as a boyfriend – girlfriend relationship, though two relationships had, the men said, ended by the time the pregnancy was discovered. Six of the pregnancies were reported as having occurred as the result of either a one off sexual encounter, or with an infrequent, casual, partner. It is acknowledged here that the men's accounts are likely to have been shaped by their own desire to present a certain version of themselves and their behaviour to me. For example, the number of terminations reported was low and may reflect the reluctance of some of the men to 'admit' involvement with abortion, though as the proportion of pregnancies ending in termination is relatively low amongst young women from socially deprived areas (McLeod, 2001) such obfuscation may not have been taking place. Certainly, nearly all of the men's accounts were internally consistent with regard to pregnancy outcome as well as other aspects of their sexual and reproductive lives.

### *Reactions to pregnancy*

Retrospectively reported reactions to the eighteen pregnancies varied and included: “*the best feeling ever*”, being “*scared*”, “*pleased*”, “*shocked*”, “*stunned*” and “*happy*”. Amongst those who conceived with a girlfriend, five reported welcoming the pregnancy, four reported mixed feelings, two described being unhappy and one said he felt ambivalent. Amongst those conceiving with a casual partner, three reported feeling unhappy at the news of pregnancy, one said he was happy and two were ambivalent. For most of the men, how they felt appeared in large part to depend on how they felt about the woman involved, though a couple of them felt that a baby was unequivocally a ‘good thing’: “*the more the merrier*” in the words of one. The three men who described themselves as ambivalent appeared to feel unemotional about the pregnancies. Two were uncertain whether they were responsible for the pregnancy, but according to their accounts they did not care whether or not they were. One, for example, talked about a pregnancy that could have been his as “*nothing to do with me*”. The third had broken up with his girlfriend before she discovered she was pregnant but did not speak to her throughout the pregnancy; her mother had told him that her daughter was pregnant.

For all but one of the men, involvement in the decision-making processes surrounding the outcome of the pregnancy appeared to be limited. Indeed, most of these men did not appear to have considered that there might be a decision to take, simply accepting that a pregnancy would proceed. Absent from their accounts were descriptions of reflection on what having a baby might *mean* in the longer term.

Chris recalled his girlfriend phoning him and telling him, when he was 15 years old, that she was pregnant and was keeping the baby. Kenny said he felt unhappy about his girlfriend's pregnancy but said that he would never have considered suggesting that it was terminated: *"that's sick in the heid"*. Paul did not speak to his ex-partner at all during her pregnancy. He saw her once during the pregnancy – which he knew was his because her mother had told him - but neither spoke to the other, and the next time he saw her she was pushing a pram following the birth of the baby. He commented only:

*"I knew she wouldnae [have a termination].... it's just something you don't dae innit?"*.

Derek and Patrick were not even aware of what the outcome of the pregnancy had been, having no further contact with the woman involved.

Only Allan described being actively involved in decision-making as to the outcome of the pregnancy:

*"It was weird making up my mind whether to kill something and like I said I had strong feelings about what I wanted to do, ken [you know], when I'm getting older and what I want to do, where I want to go, and I'd seen how hard it was [his brother had an unplanned baby]... She [girlfriend] was wanting to keep it a bit more than I did. We just sat down and had a proper chat about it. It took a couple of weeks [to make a decision] like. I would send her a text like 'fuck it. I want to keep it' and then we'd speak that night and then I'd be like 'no' [mumbles].... And I ended up falling out with her because of it. I like didn't speak to her for like four days and then she just went and got it [termination] done. She just came back and said 'it's done now' and I was just like 'what!'"* .

Striking in the accounts of most of the men with procreative experience was the belief and/or acceptance that it is the woman's prerogative to decide the outcome of the pregnancy. The men do not question their lack of power in the decision-making processes surrounding this. For a small number of them this is, perhaps, because they do not care enough about the pregnancy to have any interest in how it proceeds. Patrick, for example, accepted that he would probably never again see the woman with whom he had a one off sexual encounter resulting in pregnancy and did not appear to have any interest in knowing whether she terminated the pregnancy or went on to have the child. It was *her* pregnancy and, as such, not of any concern to him. There were others, however, such as Derek, who were more interested in the outcome of the pregnancy but who accepted, unquestioningly, that the pregnancy belonged to the female partner. They did not feel they had, or *should* have, any right to influence their partner's decision. That pregnancies tended to be seen as the property of the female partner reflects both the power of the female partner to claim a pregnancy as her own, and the power of the male partner to be able to leave the consequences of sex largely to the woman.

### *Miscarriage*

All of the miscarriages appeared to have occurred in pregnancies for which there were no termination plans. All but one of the men whose partner experienced miscarriage talked emotionally about this. Kenny was the exception; twice his friend's younger sister had become pregnant by him and both times he was relieved when she miscarried as it meant his friend would not find out that he was having intercourse with her. Shaun, on the other hand, described himself and his partner being

“*devastated*” when she miscarried, blaming their subsequent break-up on this. Scott, too, described how he felt when a pregnancy conceived when he was several years younger ended in a miscarriage:

*“she had that BCG thing [vaccine]. I don’t know whether that triggered something cos the nurse hadnae asked her if she was pregnant or that, eh ken [you know] they’re meant tae, but she ended up just collapsing and she lost it eh. I was raging [very angry]. I think what I done efter that really was started drinking for ages, eh? Started getting st... for about a month and a half I was just getting drunk every day, went to school drunk, get to school, took magic mushrooms in school and that”.*

This relationship also broke up shortly afterwards.

### *Fatherhood*

Alan, Chris, Kenny, Paul and Scott had fathered a child, with John and Martyn uncertain about whether babies born to ex-partners were theirs but suspecting they were, and Derek unsure as to whether his ex-partner’s pregnancy was his or her husband’s or, indeed, whether the pregnancy had gone to term. Patrick assumed that the woman he had impregnated had terminated the pregnancy but he had had no further contact with her. Here the experiences of the five who were clear that they were fathers are explored.

Alan and Chris were still in a relationship with the mother of their child. They both described being in regular touch with their partner and the child. Both had been co-habiting with their partner before coming to prison, and planned to move back into the family home on release. Kenny, Paul and Scott had split up with their partners before the birth of the baby, two of them before the pregnancy had been discovered. Scott

had a tolerable relationship with his ex-girlfriend, and had seen his child sporadically, though had had no contact with his daughter or his ex-partner since entering prison. Kenny and Paul had an acrimonious relationship with the mothers of their babies. Their own mothers – the babies’ grandmothers – were the ones who were trying to develop relationships with the children, provide some financial support, and take them to the prison for occasional visits with their fathers. Indeed, the mothers of all but one of the five fathers and/or the baby’s maternal grandmothers appeared to play a significant caring and/or financial role in their grandchildren’s lives. While all three of the estranged men had plans for developing close relationships with their children on release, these plans appeared to be fairly unformulated, did not seem to have been made in consultation with the children’s mothers, and appeared unrealistic in the context of other information offered about their lives.

Alan, Paul and Kenny’s children had been born while, or immediately before, their fathers were imprisoned. These men, therefore, had had little chance to play the role of ‘father’. Chris and Scott’s children were older, they did talk about ‘being a dad’. Chris did not describe himself as being a ‘hands on’ father. He was often left in sole charge of his son when his partner went out to work on the weekend (he himself had never had a job), but said he tended to *“put him in my ma’s [mother’s]”*. He reflected that his own father had done more for him than he had done with his son:

*“I was always wae my da [father], wherever my da went. My da always took me to the park, played fitba [football] and all that with me and sort of showed me how to use a bike and aw that”*.

Scott had never lived with his daughter but described visiting her house regularly “*sit in, maybe have a joint wi’ her [ex-girlfriend] or something, sit with the bairn [child]*”. Sometimes he would take her to the park or to feed the ducks, and he described buying her designer clothes and toys though not making any regular financial contributions. He said he refused to do more domestic tasks such as changing nappies. While he expressed a desire to resume contact with his daughter on release from prison, he also said during a different part of the interview that he planned to move abroad.

While Alan and Chris planned to return to the family home to continue to bring up their child with their partner – both said further children were planned – the future for the other three looked to be considerably more uncertain. All five, however, were very clear that they valued being fathers and that being a ‘good father’ was important to them. What ‘being a good father’ meant to the men was explored during the interviews. Unlike the men without children (see below), most of the fathers did not mention being able to provide financially in this context. Perhaps their situation, as incarcerated prisoners unable to provide for their child while inside, and possibly not on release either given the problems ex-prisoners can have finding paid employment, led them to focus on what they considered to be more attainable (once released at least) components of the fathering role.

Four of the five fathers talked about doing things with their child and taking him/her places as the most important facet of fatherhood. They all referenced their own father, either saying they intended to be like him:



*“[he] made sure that we’ve been out of Glasgow and away fishing, taking us to fitba [football] and that” [Alan].*

Or, conversely, that they would strive *not* to be like him, vowing to spend ‘quality time’ with their child. The men did not tend to dwell on how their being incarcerated impeded their role as fathers, though all acknowledged that not ‘being there’, because they were in prison, was not ideal:

*“dinnae ken [don’t know] if I’m good [at being a father], ‘cause if I’m a good father I’d be there every single day eh?” [Scott].*

Whether or not these men’s ideas and aspirations about being ‘a good father’ are reflected in their past and future behaviour is unknown; indeed some elements of their accounts might lead one to question whether their intentions are being played out. It is, however, important to note that all have ideas of what ‘being a good father’ involves.

#### *Repeat procreators*

Four of the men (Allan, John, Kenny, Scott) were responsible for 10 of the 18 pregnancies, with 9 women. John and Kenny both said they saw pregnancy as a ‘happy’ event, to be welcomed and not avoided, though neither had deliberately planned for this to happen with their partner. They reported rarely having used a condom and leaving contraception to their partners, apparently ambivalent as to whether it was used or not.

Allan’s and Scott’s accounts, on the other hand, revealed a greater level of reflection about pregnancy and about their own contraceptive responsibility. Allan claimed he

had always been keen to avoid pregnancy, and became even more careful to avoid a subsequent pregnancy after a girlfriend became pregnant early on in his sexual career (when no contraception had been used). The second pregnancy was, he said, a result of a faulty contraceptive patch. Scott described the first pregnancy for which he was responsible as being “*unlucky*”: no contraception was used. His second pregnancy happened with a girlfriend who, he said, was clear that she had been taking the pill every day. Though Scott described himself as being averse to another pregnancy after the first one, and said that he did check regularly that his later girlfriend was remembering to take the pill, he recounted a number of occasions of intercourse with other partners where he did not use a condom, or ask them if they were using contraception. He disclosed that even after the occurrence of two pregnancies for which he was responsible, he did not spend a great deal of time thinking about contraception and, when drunk or stoned and about to engage in intercourse, such matters did not cross his mind at all.

### **Attitudes to pregnancy and fatherhood amongst those men not responsible for a pregnancy**

The remaining 28 men reported that they had not been responsible for a pregnancy. Most felt they would like children at some point in the future but were not yet ready to become fathers. Exposure to young children, their own young age and immaturity, and their inability to provide financially for a child emerged as key supports for their belief that they are not ready for fatherhood. The men’s emphasis on being close, emotionally, to one’s child, and being able to protect him/her, is also discussed. This section ends by focusing on the relatively small number of men who said they are

keen to become fathers, exploring, very briefly, what might be different about their situation or attitudes.

When the men were asked what they thought their reaction might be if a sexual partner announced she was pregnant, responses included “*would be devastated*”, “*gutted*”, “*have mixed feelings*” and “*would feel happy*”. Only seven of the men said that the issue of a partner becoming pregnant had been something they had spent time thinking about, with Stuart’s response typical:

*“I’ve never even thought about it so I’ve no’. It’s just, if it’d come up it’d come up. If they had like [got pregnant], if they’d just phoned me and said to me, then I’d worry about it then...”*

Notably, five of these seven men reported having used contraception most or every time they had had intercourse in contrast to only three of the 21 men who said they had not thought or worried about the possibility of pregnancy.

Despite the lack of salience pregnancy had to most of these sexually active young men nearly all were able to talk about their likely reactions to this hypothetical situation during the interview. Nearly all felt that getting a girlfriend pregnant would be much more acceptable than getting a casual partner pregnant, the key factor in men’s feelings about a pregnancy being their relationship with the woman. “*It depends who it was wi’*” was a typical answer to how one would feel about a pregnancy. Ian reckoned:

*“It’s just, if I knew the girl, and I was going oot wi’ her for ages, then I wouldn’t mind, but if it was just a one night stand, I wouldnae want to be a dad through that”.*

While the pregnancy of a casual partner would have been unwelcome to nearly all the men, a girlfriend's pregnancy, though not aspired to, would be less likely to be regarded as "*a disaster*". A pregnancy in a casual partner tended to be seen by the men as suspicious, an attempt by the woman involved to 'dupe' the man, trapping him into a situation over which he had no control. A girlfriend becoming pregnant was, however, seen as much more legitimate with the men apparently willing to take some responsibility for the outcome of their sexual relations in this context. As with the rest of the sample, most thought it should be the woman's decision as to whether to continue with a pregnancy.

Generally, the more exposure the men had had to babies and young children in recent years, the less likely they appeared to be to want to have their own child in the near future. Luke, for example, described his experience of living with his brother and his new-born niece:

*"It didnae put me off, it just made sure that I knew I wasnae ready yet... I still wanted to go out at the weekends and that, and I was coming hame and I was always blitzed [very drunk] and then like sleeping in the hall and stuff like that, and you cannae dae that if you've got your own kid, the kid comes first".*

Some men had friends with children but had little contact with the children themselves. For some, though not all, of these men, having friends who had become fathers appeared to have made fatherhood a more attractive proposition to them (see below). These men, while not actually exposed to children, were exposed to the idea of children.

Age was a factor mentioned by several of the men who felt they were simply “*too young*” to have a baby. Not being mature enough and still having things they wanted to do in life which they thought would not be possible with a baby were both pertinent here. Adam said:

*“I don’t know what to dae wi’ it [a baby], because I’m still young”.*

Nearly all of the men, unprompted, raised the issue of the importance of being able to provide financially for a child if one was to become a father. This usually included having a house or a flat and for most was a barrier to the feasibility of parenthood.

Michael was typical:

*“I want to get a job and then a flat for quite a while, have a job, get some savings and stuff before I go doing that [having a child] because I don’t want to end up, dunno, being on a giro [receiving money from social security]”.*

A small number of the men felt they were in a position to financially support a child. This did not necessarily mean they were keen to become fathers in the near future, but they tended to feel more comfortable with the idea of fatherhood. Kieran, for example, said:

*“now I’m basically a qualified plumber, I’ve got myself a good job, stuff like that eh, so I feel a wee bit more comfortable”.*

Although the men appeared to see their ability to provide financially for any child they may have in the future as *the* central requisite of fatherhood, when recalling how they were fathered it was referred to by only a handful of them. Perhaps that the majority of the young men interviewed for this study (23 of the 40) had grown up completely, largely (for most of their youth), or partly (in more recent, teenage,

years), without their father in the household is relevant in understanding this. Even amongst those who had grown up with both their birth mother and father, several talked of fathers who had not had a job during this time. Still, however, the providing role was recognised and valued by these young men when they talked of themselves becoming fathers.

### *Emotional closeness and protection*

While the men made it clear that being able to provide was a necessary pre-requisite of becoming a father, when they talked about what kind of fathers they would be it was emotional closeness that they emphasised. Protection also featured explicitly in some accounts (Townsend, 2002):

*“take my daughter or son to the park, pure stuff like that, be good to her, take her anywhere she wants, try and buy her whatever she wants and that. See her all the time, I pure take care o’ her, aye. Just always... when I’m in the hoose I’m always like, just pick her up and just walk about wi’ her and that, carry on [mess around] wi’ her” [Adam].*

As with the men who had already become fathers, this group of men talked about ‘being a good father’ with reference to their own experience of being fathered, either expressing a desire to be like their own father or determined not to be so. Emotional contact - especially in the context of taking children places such as the safari park, or doing things like playing football together - appeared to be valued in particular by the men, either because it was something their own father had been good at, or because he had not and they wanted to be different. Townsend (2002) highlights conflicts between the different facets of fatherhood; a small number of the Scottish men made

an explicit link between their father being too busy providing to have time for much emotional contact, a theme very much apparent amongst Townsend's Californian men.

*The deviant cases: the men keen to become fathers*

While most of the men said they were not yet ready for fatherhood, five of the 28 who had not experienced a pregnancy were much more positive about the idea. For one, Graham, this was relationship specific: he had been with his girlfriend for several years and felt emotionally secure enough to have a baby. He also felt that when he was released from prison he would be old enough, and as a couple they would be financially secure enough, his girlfriend having bought a house and him promised a job with his uncle's company; in Townsend's (2002) terms he would be able to attain the full package of home, wife (Graham was one of the few men who mentioned marriage, most felt it was irrelevant to them), job and child.

The other men expressed a desire to have "*a wean*" [a child] largely because they liked children and/or some of their friends had children. Two of them felt that having a child would settle them down and stop them from re-offending:

*" I think that's the only thing that'll settle me doon, to be honest: a kid" [Martin].*

## **Discussion**

What can these data tell us about conceptualisations of fatherhood amongst this potentially disaffected group of Scottish men in the early twenty-first century? To what extent are these conceptualisations a product of the dominant cultural values of the time and place? Townsend's (2002) work *The Package Deal*, referenced a number

of times above, focused on a very different population: men born in the 1950s who attended the same Californian high school. Townsend argues that men treat fatherhood as a 'package deal' made up also of three other elements: marriage, employment and home ownership. Townsend's men are reluctant to take on fatherhood, or see themselves as failures, if fatherhood does not occur in the context of home ownership, for which a steady job and marriage are also needed. Situated in a different time and in a different geographical, social and economic location, the men interviewed here, incarcerated in a Scottish prison, rarely mention marriage. Having a child in the context of having a steady partner and a job (with the money from this a house or a flat would be paid for, though not necessarily owned) is, however, important. Townsend emphasises that his men, who are a couple of decades older than these men, are a product of 'dominant culture' in that place and time. Dominant culture in the California of the late twentieth century – in terms of the norms of employment, family form, and home ownership – was very different to that in which these young Scottish men have grown-up. They are, largely, from deprived communities, coming of age in the early years of the twenty-first century. Most have grown up without their father living in the household for some, all or most of their childhood. A number have had no contact with their natural father, others only sporadic contact. Employment prospects in the communities from which they are from can be bleak for any young man, even more so for those with a criminal record. Having a mortgage and owning a home would not necessarily be what their parent(s) had done (these data were not collected but in the areas from which many of them were from council housing would have been the dominant form of housing). These men, therefore, have quite different frames of reference to Townsend's (2002) men. Despite this, the Scottish men who had not been involved in a pregnancy, like



Townsend's (2002) men, overwhelmingly regarded having a stable job, and being a provider as a key role of fatherhood, a necessary pre-requisite to a planned pregnancy. Emotional bonding with one's child is recognised by the American and by the Scottish men as being a very important facet of fathering (see also Dermott, 2008). Across the time and social continuum there are commonalities.

What can this sort of analysis add to reflections on future development of YOI-based interventions in the areas of parenting and SRE? Those working in the field have suggested there is a need for good quality interventions intended to improve fatherhood skills amongst incarcerated young offenders (Meek, 2007). It is hypothesised that such interventions may help mend damaged family relationships leading to a more stable family background which might provide the grounding the offender needs to desist from further crime (Farrall, 2002) so interrupting inter-generational cycles of deprivation (Welshman, 2007). They may also go some way in improving child health outcomes in the early years and beyond (Murray & Farrington, 2006; Doyle, Harman, Heckman & Tremblay, 2009). However such interventions have been patchy and few evaluative studies exist in the UK or US (Palm, 2001; Graham, Hamilton, Jarvis & Tyler, 2004). SRE sited within YOIs is also patchy, with rigorous and systematic evaluative work sparse. The role of such interventions in enabling these men to reflect on fatherhood and modify intentions and skills in relation to (preventing) pregnancy and fatherhood therefore remains unclear.

Findings here suggest that the men desire to be good fathers, though there may be barriers to their fulfilling these desires. Their own experience of being fathered provides positive and negative reference points, ways in which they want to be the

same as or different to their own fathers. While the fathers and non-fathers alike had spent little time thinking about becoming fathers – and often did not link unprotected sex with pregnancy – they stressed the value of being emotionally close to any child they might have when encouraged to reflect on ‘being a good father’ during the interview. Most of the men who had not been involved in a pregnancy recognised that they were not in a position to provide for a child and therefore planning a pregnancy was not a good idea.

From a public health perspective there are, then, several positives on which any parenting or SRE programme could work to develop further. These men, on the basis of their accounts at least (we need also to speak to their (ex)partners and their children now and in the future), are not the feckless actual and potential fathers that some might assume them to be. Recent US-based interventions (see Parra-Cadona, Wampler & Sharp, 2006) have included the goal of encouraging young fathers to understand issues around their own fathering by reflecting on their experiences as sons; this has been less prominent in UK interventions but should, perhaps, be utilised more as a means of enabling participants to reflect and build on their conceptualisations of fatherhood. This could be a first step in enabling them to behave as ‘good fathers’: conceptualisations could be explored and built on with the course facilitators and the men could be offered the resources and skills to develop these with their own children, or encouraged to think more about their procreative responsibilities if they have no children.

Indeed, Marsiglio (Marsiglio, 1998; Marsiglio, Hutchinson & Cohan, 2001) develops the concept of *procreative consciousness*:

*“men’s attitudes, feelings, and impressions of themselves as these factors pertain to various aspects of procreation – including men’s image of themselves as prospective fathers”*. (Marsiglio, Hutchinson & Cohan, 2001, p. 124).

Marsiglio asserts that young men need to develop a better sense of how masculine and partner role identities are related to their sexual and procreative feelings and suggests that SRE and other health education campaigns need to work on the men’s perceptions of masculinity in order that they include notions of adulthood responsibility. Ferguson & Hogan (2007) have, more recently, called for opportunities to be created for men to reflect, in a supported way, on their potential to impregnate partners. This would include the linking of their lack of readiness to become fathers with contraceptive use, a link that appears to be missing in the minds of many of the men interviewed here.

Certainly, an analysis of this sample’s knowledge and attitudes towards Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) (Buston & Wight, 2010) suggests that the YOI as a site for sexual health promotion may have strong potential which is currently under-utilised. Most of these men will be re-entering the community in the near future. While they are a captive audience, more work should be undertaken focused on improving their sexual health and better equipping them for fatherhood in order that they, and any children they may have, can benefit.

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Table 1: Characteristics of the interviewees

		Interviewees (N=40)
<i>Sex education</i>		
	Good or excellent sex education from one or more sources	25
<i>Girlfriends</i>		
	Girlfriend at present	21
	Girlfriend in past	16
	Never had girlfriend	3
<i>Number of sexual partners</i>		
	2 – 5	5
	6 – 10	12
	More than 10	23
<i>Contraceptive use</i>		
	Every time	1
	Most times	13
	About half the times	6

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Not very often	9
Never	8
Don't know/can't remember	3
 <i>Pregnancy</i>	
No	28
Don't know, maybe	3
Once	5
More than once	4
 <i>Sexually transmitted infections</i>	
Tested	24
Tested more than once	8
Tested three or more times	5
Tested in community only	8
Tested within Young Offender Institute only	12
Tested in community and Young Offender Institute	8
Positive diagnosis	5
 <i>Age</i>	
16	1
17	4
18	17
19	13
20	5
 <i>Residential care</i>	

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Yes	7
No	33
 <i>Religion</i>	
None	22
Christian – Catholic	10
Christian – Protestant	7
Muslim	1
 <i>Qualifications</i>	
None	14
Standard grades or equivalent only *	20
Other	6

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\* Standard grades are national exams usually taken at the end of statutory education (age 16).