

Incarceration in Fragile Families

Christopher Wildeman and Bruce Western

Summary

Since the mid-1970s the U.S. imprisonment rate has increased roughly fivefold. As Christopher Wildeman and Bruce Western explain, the effects of this sea change in the imprisonment rate—commonly called mass imprisonment or the prison boom—have been concentrated among those most likely to form fragile families: poor and minority men with little schooling.

Imprisonment diminishes the earnings of adult men, compromises their health, reduces familial resources, and contributes to family breakup. It also adds to the deficits of poor children, thus ensuring that the effects of imprisonment on inequality are transferred intergenerationally. Perversely, incarceration has its most corrosive effects on families whose fathers were involved in neither domestic violence nor violent crime before being imprisoned. Because having a parent go to prison is now so common for poor, minority children and so negatively affects them, the authors argue that mass imprisonment may increase future racial and class inequality—and may even lead to more crime in the long term, thereby undoing any benefits of the prison boom.

U.S. crime policy has thus, in the name of public safety, produced more vulnerable families and reduced the life chances of their children. Wildeman and Western advocate several policy reforms, such as limiting prison time for drug offenders and for parolees who violate the technical conditions of their parole, reconsidering sentence enhancements for repeat offenders, and expanding supports for prisoners and ex-prisoners.

But Wildeman and Western argue that criminal justice reform alone will not solve the problems of school failure, joblessness, untreated addiction, and mental illness that pave the way to prison. In fact, focusing solely on criminal justice reforms would repeat the mistakes the nation made during the prison boom: trying to solve deep social problems with criminal justice policies. Addressing those broad problems, they say, requires a greater social commitment to education, public health, and the employment opportunities of low-skilled men and women. The primary sources of order and stability—public safety in its wide sense—are the informal social controls of family and work. Thus, broad social policies hold the promise not only of improving the well-being of fragile families, but also, by strengthening families and providing jobs, of contributing to public safety.

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Over the past thirty-five years, the U.S. incarceration rate has risen fivefold, from around 100 to around 500 prisoners for every 100,000 people. In just the past decade, imprisonment has become commonplace for young men living in poor and minority communities, and life in fragile families has been significantly altered. As incarceration rates have soared, poor women and children have been left to deal with the separation, visitation, and return of their progeny, partners, and parents. A burgeoning research literature shows that incarceration, on average, impairs health and diminishes the earnings of adult men, many of whom are fathers. Incarceration also elevates the risk of divorce and separation, diminishes the financial resources and well-being of wives and girlfriends left behind, and is linked to increases in children's aggression, behavioral problems, and social marginalization. By further reducing the well-being of fragile families, mass imprisonment lays the groundwork for a vicious cycle in which the criminal justice system does not diminish—and may even increase—addiction, abuse, and crime.

We first describe the concentration of incarceration in, and negative effects on, fragile families and then discuss the implications of these findings and suggest some future directions for policy. Sentencing policies that would shrink the penal population while preserving public safety offer one key direction for reform. But criminal justice reform will go only so far in reducing the negative effects of crime and incarceration on fragile families. Because many of the men who come into contact with the criminal justice system struggle with chronic unemployment, untreated addiction, poor health, and mental illness, protecting fragile families from the

Most of the chapters in this volume rely primarily on research that uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study. Because most of the research they review uses these unique data, the authors of these chapters can use the term “fragile families” in the strict sense—families in which the parents were unmarried when the child was born. For better or for worse, much of the research we rely on did not use data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study. But, as we show, most of the families who experience incarceration were probably unmarried—and almost certainly were vulnerable in other ways—at the time of the child's birth. Thus, we use the term “fragile families” in this chapter to describe families who experience incarceration, even though not all of the families we consider were “fragile families” in the strict sense.

effects of violence and antisocial behavior will ultimately depend on social policy as much as criminal justice reform. Social policies that provide the structure and stakes in conformity known to control crime hold real promise for buffering fragile families from the negative effects of both crime and incarceration. Such policies will enable the nation to begin to move away from the formal sanctions of prison and jail sentences to the informal social controls of stable work and family life.

The Demography of Punishment in America

In order to understand why incarceration may be so consequential for children in fragile families, we first must determine what is unique about American imprisonment. In this section, we document the novelty of American imprisonment, discuss the causes of the prison boom, and outline how common imprisonment is for adult men and parental imprisonment is for children.

Mass Imprisonment in Comparative-Historical Perspective

For most of the twentieth century, researchers studying U.S. child well-being were unlikely to see prisons as a source of social inequality. As late as the mid-1970s, only 100 out of every 100,000 Americans were incarcerated in a state or federal prison; only 2 percent of the population went to prison at any point in their lives.¹ The nation's penal system would have seemed unlikely to weigh heavily on citizens' life chances, not just because the incarceration rate was low in an absolute sense, but also because of its historic stability. For the first three-quarters of the twentieth century, the American imprisonment rate per 100,000 rarely exceeded 125 or fell below 75.²

Today the U.S. incarceration rate is about seven times higher than the West European average and is approached only by rates in the penal systems of some former Soviet republics and South Africa.³ This is a drastic change from the early 1970s, when the American incarceration rate was only about twice the rate of most other wealthy democracies. Although the U.S. rate has been rising more slowly in recent years, it has continued to climb even through a recession that has caused deep cuts in state budgets. The American incarceration rate has been much higher than that of other long-standing democracies since at least the late 1980s, but American men have been at extremely high lifetime risk of imprisonment beginning only in the past decade, further setting the American penal system apart from those of other democracies. As of the early 2000s, 6.6 percent of Americans, and more than 11 percent of American men, could expect to go to prison at some point.⁴ These figures show that mass imprisonment⁵ is historically novel within America and that imprisonment is now a common experience for adult men.

The Causes of Mass Imprisonment

What caused the U.S. imprisonment rate to increase so sharply? Rising crime would seem an obvious suspect. But because crime rates have risen and fallen significantly since the mid-1970s while the imprisonment rate has been climbing without interruption, the year-to-year fluctuations in crime are unlikely to have directly produced the steady decades-long increase in the imprisonment rate. Though a variety of explanations have been proposed, researchers agree on two main causes for rising imprisonment: changes in the economic and social life of urban men with little schooling, and a punitive turn in criminal justice policy. It is helpful to think of the first as providing the raw material for the prison boom and the second as transforming this raw material into a greatly enlarged penal population.

Before the late 1960s, urban manufacturing industries helped guarantee the livelihoods of low-skilled men in American cities. Unemployment rates of these men were relatively high compared with those of men with more schooling, but most prime-age men with only a high school education were working at wages that could support a family. Their jobs provided stakes in conformity⁶ not only through their stability, but also through the family ties that a steady paycheck helped support. Urban manufacturing thus provided not just a decent standard of living, but also a daily routine and an attachment to mainstream social institutions. In this setting, deindustrialization was catastrophic. Widespread joblessness in poor urban neighborhoods coupled with the emergence of a gray economy and a booming drug trade to foster addiction and careers in crime, leaving young men in inner cities vulnerable to arrest and prosecution.⁷

Table 1. Cumulative Risk of Imprisonment by Age 30–34 for Men Born between 1945–49 and 1975–79, by Race and Education

Percent	Birth cohort						
	1945–49	1950–54	1955–59	1960–64	1965–69	1970–74	1975–79
White men							
High school dropouts	4.2	7.2	8.0	8.0	10.5	14.8	15.3
High school only	0.7	2.0	2.1	2.5	4.0	3.8	4.1
All noncollege	1.8	2.9	3.2	3.7	5.1	5.1	6.3
Some college	0.7	0.7	0.6	0.8	0.7	0.9	1.2
All men	1.2	1.9	2.0	2.2	2.8	2.8	3.3
African American men							
High school dropouts	14.7	19.6	27.6	41.6	57.0	62.5	69.0
High school only	10.2	11.3	9.4	12.4	16.8	20.3	18.0
All noncollege	12.1	14.1	14.7	19.9	26.7	30.9	35.7
Some college	4.9	3.5	4.3	5.5	6.8	8.5	7.6
All men	9.0	10.6	11.5	15.2	20.3	22.8	20.7

Source: Bruce Western and Christopher Wildeman, "The Black Family and Mass Incarceration," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 621, no. 1 (2009): 231.

At this point, changes in the criminal justice system became important. As late as the mid-1970s, many arrests—most significantly, for public order and drug offenses—would have drawn no more than a small fine or a short spell of community supervision. From the mid-1970s, a punitive shift in criminal justice policy turned imprisonment into the primary penalty for a felony conviction. Tougher drug sentences, together with limits on parole and sentence enhancements for repeat and violent offenders, increased prison admission rates and time served in prison.⁸ Policing also intensified, and drug arrest rates, particularly among African Americans, increased sharply through the 1980s. In this way, the combination of a declining labor market for low-skill men and a punitive shift in criminal justice policies produced a sharp increase in incarceration rates.

Disparities in the Cumulative Risk of (Parental) Imprisonment

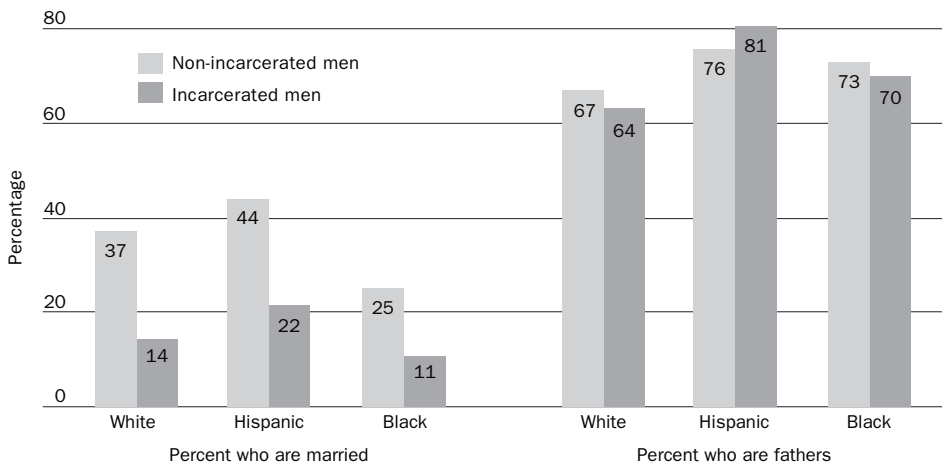
Were imprisonment evenly distributed throughout the population, it would be of no greater consequence for fragile families than for any other demographic group. But large

racial and class disparities in imprisonment have produced extremely high lifetime risks of imprisonment for minority men with little schooling, and small but rapidly growing risks of imprisonment for similar women. Because these men and women are unlikely to marry but no less likely than those outside of prison to have children, they are likely to form fragile families.

Table 1 shows changes in the risk of imprisonment by age thirty to thirty-four for cohorts of men born between 1945–49 and 1975–79.⁹ The risk nearly tripled for white men and more than doubled for African American men. Although both groups experienced large relative increases in the risk of imprisonment, the absolute change in this risk was much larger for African American men. In the youngest cohort, born between 1975 and 1979, around one in five African American men experienced imprisonment; for comparable white men, the risk was around one in thirty.

When risks are further broken down by level of education within racial groups, differences

Figure 1. Percentage of Men Aged 22–30 Who Were Married in 2000 and Men Aged 33–40 Who Were Fathers in 1997–98



Source: Bruce Western, *Punishment and Inequality in America* (New York: Russell Sage, 2006), p. 137.

in the risk of imprisonment become even more pronounced. Most notably, African American men in recent cohorts who did not complete some college had around a one in three chance of going to prison at some point, while African American men in the same cohort who dropped out of high school had a two in three chance of being incarcerated. Imprisonment among white men is significantly lower. Even for the most marginal group of white men—those who did not complete high school—only 15.3 percent went to prison. Thus the consequences of mass imprisonment are concentrated among those already most on the periphery of society—African American and (to a lesser degree) white men with little schooling—the same segments of society in which fragile families are most likely to be formed.

Incarceration and single parenthood, concentrated among minority men and women with little schooling, combined to produce high rates of imprisonment among fathers in disadvantaged families. The combination of incarceration and single parenthood is

reflected in marriage rates of men in prison. While about 25 percent of African American men aged twenty-two to thirty who are not incarcerated are married, the marriage rate is only 11 percent among incarcerated men (figure 1). Surveys of men in prison find that though they are less likely to be married than men who are not in prison, they are just as likely to have children. As a result, African American children growing up in fragile families are likely to have fathers who have been incarcerated at some point.

While children growing up in fragile families are likely to have a father who has been incarcerated, how likely is it that children overall will have a parent, either a father or a mother, who is imprisoned during their childhood? Table 2 reports estimates of a child's risk of paternal and maternal imprisonment by age fourteen. The table compares two cohorts, one born in 1978 and reaching age fourteen in 1992, at the beginning of the era of mass incarceration, and a younger cohort born in 1990 and reaching age fourteen in 2004, at

Table 2. Cumulative Risk of Paternal and Maternal Imprisonment by Age Fourteen for Children Born in 1978 and 1990, by Race and Parental Education

Percent	White children				African American children			
	Paternal		Maternal		Paternal		Maternal	
	1978	1990	1978	1990	1978	1990	1978	1990
All children	2.2	3.6	0.2	0.6	13.8	25.1	1.4	3.3
By parental education								
All noncollege	2.9	5.6	0.2	0.8	15.6	30.2	1.5	3.6
High school dropout	4.1	7.2	0.2	1.0	22.0	50.5	1.9	5.0
High school only	2.0	4.8	0.2	0.7	10.2	20.4	0.9	2.6
Some college	1.4	1.7	0.2	0.3	7.1	13.4	1.2	2.6

Source: Christopher Wildeman, "Parental Imprisonment, the Prison Boom, and the Concentration of Childhood Disadvantage," *Demography* 46, no. 2 (2009): 271, 273.

the height of the American prison boom.¹⁰ The table indicates that parental, especially paternal, imprisonment has become quite common for children in fragile families in the past decade. One of every four African American children born in 1990 had a father go to prison. For children of high school dropouts, the share was one-half. For whites, by contrast, only seven of every one hundred children born in 1990 whose fathers were high school dropouts experienced paternal imprisonment. Estimates using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study confirm that many children in fragile families experience paternal imprisonment.¹¹

In light of rapid growth in the risk of imprisonment for women over this period, the risk of maternal imprisonment might also be expected to have grown.¹² Table 2 also presents estimates of the risk of maternal imprisonment, by maternal education and the child's race and birth cohort, and suggests two conclusions. First, the risk of maternal imprisonment for white children is tiny. Even white children whose mothers did not finish high school had only a 1 percent chance of experiencing maternal imprisonment. Second, for African American children,

especially those with low-education mothers, maternal imprisonment has become somewhat common. Fully 5 percent of African American children born in 1990 to mothers who did not complete high school had their mother imprisoned. Even more striking, the risk of paternal imprisonment for white children born in 1990 (3.6 percent) is comparable to the risk of maternal imprisonment for African American children born that same year (3.3 percent).

The focus in this section has been on racial disparities in the risk of parental imprisonment during childhood. But point-in-time disparities are important too. By the year 2000, nearly 10 percent of all African American children but only 1 percent of all white children had a parent incarcerated on any given day.¹³ This statistic emphasizes the potentially substantial racial disparities in the total amount of time children spend with a parent incarcerated.

Research Findings on the Consequences of Imprisonment for Fragile Families

Ubiquitous imprisonment associated with mass incarceration is concentrated among the

parents of fragile families. Even if it has no negative consequences for children, the concentration of imprisonment in this already-marginal group suggests a fundamental change in the social experience of childhood. More fundamentally, however, rising rates of incarceration in fragile families may further diminish the life chances of poor children.

Research on the social and family life of men with a history of incarceration dates to the beginning of the twentieth century.¹⁴ Three areas of research—on adult men, their partners, and their children—foreshadow the contemporary focus. Field studies, mostly in prison, described behavioral changes produced by prolonged institutionalization and concluded that imprisonment undermined the social life of inmates by exacerbating criminality or impairing their capacity for normal social interaction.¹⁵ A handful of studies that examined the partners of incarcerated men attempted to distinguish the effects of incarceration from the pre-existing vulnerability of the family relationships of crime-involved men.¹⁶ And clinical studies under the guidance of William Sack tended to find that paternal incarceration exacerbated pre-existing behavioral and psychological problems in children.¹⁷

Though contemporary research replays several of these themes, older research is limited in at least three ways. First, because it was conducted before the prison boom, when the imprisonment rate was lower, it may have been reasonable for researchers to assume that the men and women in prison were so highly involved in crime that their social and family contribution may have been small even had they not been in prison. But as the imprisonment rate has grown, prisoners have come to resemble more closely the general population. Thus, although the current

generation of prisoners is still more likely to engage in behaviors harmful to family life than the average free person in the population, their absence is more likely to harm the fragile families from which many of them come today than it would have been in the past.

Second, most of the earlier work on the consequences of imprisonment for adult men and families used small, nonrepresentative samples and tended to observe the adult men or their families only after they had come into contact with the penal system. Because small, nonrepresentative samples are unlikely to represent the experiences of the population, these earlier studies yield limited insight into how imprisonment affects the average family experiencing that event. Nor did most of these studies consider changes in family life that could have resulted from the period of incarceration. Because prisoners tend to differ from the average free member of society in a number of ways, their family lives may have been different from the norm even had they not gone to prison. Looking at changes in family life is thus vital for research in this area.

And, third, earlier research did not address the broader spillover effects of incarceration. Recent research has shown that imprisonment is concentrated in poor and minority communities. Though little of this research specifically tests the effects of living in a high-incarceration community, most researchers speculate that the effects are negative.¹⁸ The mechanisms through which high incarceration rates affect communities remain virtually untested empirically, though many have been hypothesized. These potential spillover effects of imprisonment could not have been anticipated by the first wave of research on prisoners and their families because imprisonment was so uncommon in that era, even

Table 3. Father Characteristics by Incarceration History and Relationship Type Five Years after the Birth of a Child

Percent unless otherwise indicated	Ever-incarcerated fathers			Never-incarcerated fathers		
	Married	Cohabiting	Nonresident	Married	Cohabiting	Nonresident
Ever abusive*	8.5	9.9	22.5	1.3	2.3	9.0
Ever abused drugs or alcohol**	16.0	22.0	41.6	6.3	10.7	14.5
Self-control***	3.5	3.5	2.7	3.8	3.7	3.3
High school dropout	39.0	52.9	47.6	19.5	38.4	32.5
N	187	191	1,202	1,032	307	923

* The father is considered to have ever been abusive if the mother reported at any follow-up interview that she had ever been cut, bruised, or seriously hurt in a fight by the father.

** The father is considered to have ever had a drug or alcohol problem if either he or the mother reported at any follow-up interview that drugs or alcohol had interfered with his personal relationships or work.

*** Paternal self-control is based on questions answered by the mother about how often the father engaged in a number of behaviors showing high or low self-control. (Higher scores indicate greater self-control.)

Source: Authors' calculations using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study.

in the poorest neighborhoods. Our focus here is on how going to prison, having a partner go to prison, or having a parent go to prison affects subsequent life chances, but one focus for future research would be to consider how living in a high-incarceration neighborhood affects families who do not directly experience incarceration.

Recent studies are better able than older research to assess the effects of incarceration on contemporary fragile families, but these studies still face acute challenges. The most serious is causal inference: does imprisonment cause negative outcomes for families or are the two simply linked? The factors influencing incarceration—men's criminality, poor social environment, and human capital deficits—are strongly correlated with poor family outcomes. To illustrate why the pre-existing differences between individuals who are incarcerated and those who are not are a concern, table 3 presents estimates based on the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study of domestic abuse, drug and alcohol abuse, self-control, and high school completion for ever- and never-incarcerated fathers five years after the birth of a child. Given the large differences between

fathers who were and were not incarcerated, it may be that it is the characteristics of fathers who go to prison rather than the experience of imprisonment that accounts for the poor outcomes in their families.

Improvements in research data and methods strengthen causal inferences a little, but episodes of antisocial behavior that cause incarceration and family disruption are very difficult to separate from the disruptive effects of incarceration itself. Because researchers rarely have accurate measures of changes in the level of drug (or alcohol) use, say, it is difficult to know if changes in these behaviors may have caused both incarceration and the attendant negative outcomes. Stronger causal conclusions require more controlled experiments (with study subjects being divided randomly into control and treatment groups)¹⁹ or studies of natural experiments exploiting policy variation.²⁰ But conducting controlled experiments is often impractical in criminal justice settings, and natural experiments are rare and tend not to be population-representative. Thus the research reviewed here uses nationally representative, longitudinal data; the studies'

subjects are not, of course, randomly assigned into prison, but the studies do control for fixed traits of individuals.

In the next three sections we review evidence on the effects of incarceration on adult men, their romantic partners, and their children. The “effect of incarceration” in this research contrasts outcomes for those who go to prison with outcomes for those who do not. In most cases, the control group receives no alternative programming or criminal justice punishment. Although we address this issue explicitly when considering the effects of parental incarceration on children (and also in our policy prescriptions later), we think it merits mentioning now as well because the high levels of antisocial behavior and addiction exhibited by the men (and women) who experience incarceration at some point suggest that “nothing” is not a good alternative. So though incarceration is likely not the best solution to the problems faced in fragile families, different interventions in the lives of these families may foster their well-being.

Effects on Adult Men

To see how parental incarceration may affect children, we begin by reviewing research on the socioeconomic consequences of imprisonment, much of which focuses on the destabilizing effects of prison time on the life course of men. A key outcome for the economic well-being of children is the post-incarceration earnings and employment of fathers. Although much research considers the effects of imprisonment on men’s economic prospects generally, we focus here only on its effects on earnings.²¹ Survey-based estimates from analyses of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (1979) indicate that incarceration diminishes men’s earnings by up to 30 percent even long after leaving prison.²² Less research exists on the effects of

imprisonment on the earnings of adult women, but the little existing research suggests that effects may be smaller for women than they are for men.²³ Although it remains unclear what share of diminished earnings is due to changes in human capital during imprisonment, research using an experimental audit design shows that a substantial share is likely attributable to employers’ strong negative reaction to job applicants with criminal records.²⁴

Research also suggests that the experience of imprisonment harms both mental and physical health. The often brutal prison environment can impair mental health, which has consequences for labor market success, relationship stability, and parenting quality. Effects on mental health can thus spill over into a host of other domains.²⁵ Imprisonment affects physical health in two main areas. First, formerly incarcerated men are more likely than otherwise comparable men to suffer from various infectious and stress-related diseases.²⁶ In probably the most sophisticated analysis to date, Rucker Johnson and Steven Raphael show that state-level imprisonment rates play an important role in increasing racial disparities in AIDS for both men and women.²⁷ Second, men are at high risk of death in the first two weeks after they are released from prison, although it is unclear whether it is imprisonment or the characteristics of the men that lead to this high risk.²⁸

Effects on Partners

By removing men from the labor market, marking them as criminals, and making it difficult for them to acquire more skills, incarceration diminishes their earnings. By exposing them to infectious disease, stress, and the stigma of a criminal record, incarceration compromises their health. If men who are likely to go to prison have little to

do with their children and the mothers of their children, then the effects of incarceration end with the offender. But although formerly incarcerated men are often seen as being disconnected from their families, ethnographers suggest that many such men are involved in family life.²⁹ Moreover, even the families of men who sometimes engage in behaviors damaging to family life tend to see their incarceration as a net loss in both the short term and the long term.³⁰

At the very least, incarceration may take a toll on familial resources. In the short term—while a man is in prison—it both diminishes family income and increases family expenses. Incarcerated men have no meaningful income and cannot pass on even their meager income to their families on the outside. Keeping in contact with an incarcerated family member is also expensive. In addition to paying for costly collect phone calls and contributing to commissary accounts, families can incur large expenses making visits.³¹ Because many of the families of the incarcerated are already poor, the costs of having a family member in prison are extremely high.

When men are released, the long-term effects of a prison record on earnings and employment also diminish familial financial resources, though until recently the size of these effects was unknown. A recent analysis of data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, however, indicates that men with incarceration histories are 14 percent less likely than otherwise comparable men who have not been incarcerated to contribute financially to their families with small children. Furthermore, those who do contribute give, on average, \$1,400 less a year than similar men.³² Because many of these families are poor, they thus face increased material hardship.³³

Economic costs are not the only costs associated with the imprisonment of a family member. Incarceration also contributes to the dissolution of romantic unions.³⁴ Although researchers generally agree that incarceration has negative effects on relationship stability, they differ in their views on how it affects the formation of new unions. On the one hand, quantitative evidence suggests that incarceration does not prevent the formation of marital bonds.³⁵ On the other hand, qualitative data suggest that poor women are unlikely to tie themselves to men who have been incarcerated, not solely because incarceration is a marker of criminality, but also because marriage to a man with a criminal record endows them with his low social status.³⁶ It is thus unclear whether incarceration itself diminishes men's marriage prospects. Even if incarceration does not hinder the formation of stable unions, however, its substantial effects on the risk of divorce and separation likely increase the number of children growing up in fragile families.

Not all couples with an incarcerated partner break up, however. Few quantitative studies consider the effects of imprisonment on a partner, but ethnographic research suggests that the emotional and social costs of a partner's incarceration are substantial. On the most basic level, it is, for many women, a heart-wrenching experience that can lead to depression.³⁷ Some ethnographic research also suggests that women keep their partner's incarceration a secret to try to avoid the stigma,³⁸ although this claim is contested by other ethnographers.³⁹ Women who keep their partner's incarceration a secret may withdraw from social networks, potentially leading to social isolation. When isolation and depression couple with poverty, it seems likely that, on average, having a partner incarcerated compromises women's well-being.

Although qualitative researchers have produced excellent research on this topic, there are few large-scale quantitative studies. Of the many gaps in current research, the lack of quantitative evidence in this area may be the most pressing.

Having a partner incarcerated could also influence the long-term well-being of other family members by changing men's behaviors in ways that alter relationship dynamics. Some research suggests that imprisonment can change men's behavior for the better. Ethnographers report, for instance, that prison time gives some men time to consider how and why they might "go straight."⁴⁰ Prisons might also positively affect health by limiting drug use and treating addiction and chronic disease. In this context, Megan Comfort has described prisons as "social service providers of first resort" for poor men.⁴¹

Other research, however, points to negative behavioral effects of prison. Anne Nurse argues that prison socializes men who had not previously been violent to solve problems with violence.⁴² As prisons have become more crowded and as public funding for educational and other programs has fallen, these negative behavioral effects of incarceration have likely become more acute.⁴³ By making men more violent, it is likely that imprisonment, on average, changes men's behavior for the worse, making them worse fathers and partners. Even among women who were relieved to see a partner incarcerated because he might get needed drug treatment in prison, almost all recognized that imprisonment had negative consequences in the long run.⁴⁴

In sum, research suggests that men's incarceration harms their romantic partners, on average, though some women are relieved at

having a partner who was abusive or struggling with addiction removed from the house. These average negative effects are especially intriguing in light of table 3. Having a partner incarcerated appears to harm women, and as we will show, having a father incarcerated has negative effects on children. Yet, formerly incarcerated men are more likely to be abusive, have higher rates of addiction, and poorer self-control than other fathers. This is a pressing issue for policy makers, because though the average effects of incarceration on family life are negative, some of these men periodically engage in behaviors damaging to family life even before going to prison. As we discuss in detail later, we think that these findings call out for criminal justice interventions that not only do not incarcerate men who have been involved in relatively minor crimes, but also attempt to curb the antisocial behaviors (including crime, addiction, and abuse) that they engage in that harm family life.

Effects on Children

Research on adult men suggests that imprisonment diminishes their earnings, disrupts their romantic unions, and compromises their health. Likewise, the imprisonment of a partner, on average, compromises the well-being of those who are left behind. Because incarceration harms adult men and women, it may also diminish the life chances of children. If it does so, then the effects of imprisonment on inequality are transferred intergenerationally. The potential intergenerational effects of imprisonment on inequality have not been lost on researchers, who have shown much interest in this area.⁴⁵

Given the negative effects of incarceration on familial resources,⁴⁶ paternal involvement,⁴⁷ and family structure,⁴⁸ we might expect these changes to link having a parent imprisoned with poor child outcomes. Yet recent

research has found little evidence in support of any of these links. In fact, some research suggests that it is the cycle of having a parent imprisoned and released or the stigma of incarceration rather than these other changes that most harms child well-being.⁴⁹

Researchers have long been fascinated by the intergenerational transmission of crime. Until recently, most of this research focused on the effects of parental criminality, rather than incarceration, on children, but research in this area increasingly suggests that both parental criminality and incarceration influence children's criminality. Isolating a causal relationship is difficult, but a number of studies show an association between parental incarceration and the criminality of children. Using data from the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development, Joseph Murray and David Farrington demonstrate a link between parental incarceration and boys' criminality and delinquency throughout the life course.⁵⁰ Other work using data from the Add Health Study, which is more broadly representative of the children of the prison boom, shows a similar relationship for contemporary young adults.⁵¹ Neither of these datasets makes it possible to consider the effects of a change in parental incarceration status on children's delinquency and criminality, but other research does. One analysis of data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study indicates that recent experiences of paternal incarceration are associated with substantial increases in the physical aggression of boys, but not girls.⁵² Although this study considers effects only on children while they are still young (rather than following them as they become adults), the repeated measures of paternal incarceration and a child behavioral problem that may be associated with future criminality suggests the robustness of the relationship between

having a father incarcerated and engaging in criminal activity.

Many studies have considered the consequences of parental incarceration for children's behavioral problems more broadly. One uses the Fragile Families data to show that having parents with a history of incarceration is associated, for three-year-old children, with externalizing behaviors such as having temper tantrums or "acting out" in other ways, but not with internalizing behaviors such as being anxious, depressed, or withdrawn.⁵³ Another study using data from school-aged children in Chicago finds that parental incarceration is associated with change in both externalizing and internalizing behaviors.⁵⁴ A final study using data from the Cambridge Study in Delinquency Development suggests that parental imprisonment contributes to higher levels of internalizing behaviors in a sample of boys and that these effects linger throughout the adult years.⁵⁵ In studies considering behavioral problems, therefore, the relationship with children's externalizing behaviors is robust across the life course, while the relationship with internalizing behaviors holds only for older children.

Although most research on the consequences of parental incarceration for children focuses on behavioral problems or aggression, other outcomes that are proxies for severe social marginalization merit attention as well. To date, research in this area focuses on three outcomes: homelessness, foster care placement, and infant mortality. In general, research in this area finds that children of incarcerated parents are at elevated risk of all three.⁵⁶ It also suggests that at least for foster care placement, maternal incarceration may have more substantial effects than paternal incarceration does, underlining

the importance of the increase in the risk of maternal imprisonment for African American children—at least for children’s risk of experiencing severe forms of disadvantage like this.⁵⁷ In fact, one study shows that the change in the female imprisonment rate explains fully 30 percent of the increase in foster care caseloads between 1985 and 2000.⁵⁸ Thus, these studies suggest that parental incarceration may increase not only criminality and behavioral problems more broadly, but also the risk of being severely marginalized in childhood and adolescence.

By further reducing the well-being of fragile families, mass imprisonment lays the groundwork for a vicious cycle in which the criminal justice system does not diminish—and may even increase—addiction, abuse, and crime.

Although the average effects of parental incarceration on children are of keen interest, those effects are likely to vary depending on the characteristics of fathers. Despite the importance of considering variations in the effects of paternal incarceration on children, researchers as yet know little about how effects vary with paternal characteristics and behaviors.⁵⁹ Two studies, however, consider how they vary by whether the father was reported by the mother to have been abusive. The first, which uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study,

finds that although paternal incarceration decreases the physical aggression of boys whose fathers had abused their mothers, it was associated with increases in aggression for boys whose fathers were not known to have abused their mothers. For boys whose fathers were incarcerated for a violent crime, aggression did not change significantly.⁶⁰ Another study finds that parental incarceration increases infant mortality risk only among children whose mothers had not been abused by the father.⁶¹ Though a thin reed, this research suggests that incarceration likely has more negative effects for children if the father was not violent or abusive.

What are we to make of these findings? First, it may be wrong to talk about a single “effect of incarceration,” because the consequences depend on an offender’s history of violent behavior. Changes in penal policy have increased the number of incarcerations for nonviolent offenses, by mandating prison time for drug crimes and by re-imprisoning parolees not for new crimes but for technical parole violations. If the negative effects of incarceration on families are particularly large for nonviolent men, penal policy has harmed families by increasing the share of nonviolent offenders in prison. Second, the distinction between “violent” and “nonviolent” offenders offers convenient rhetoric but may be a poor description of real people. Violence is partly dispositional. Some people are quick to anger and prone to aggression. But violence is also situational, promoted by environments characterized by conflict with weak social controls. It is very hard as a matter of public policy to identify just those with a violent disposition. A public safety policy that weighs the interests of children must thus work to eliminate the environments in which family violence is likely to arise.

Implications of the Research

Research has shown that imprisonment negatively affects formerly incarcerated men and their romantic partners and children. Perversely, the corrosive effects of incarceration on family life are especially pronounced when the fathers were involved in neither domestic violence nor violent crime before being imprisoned. What are the implications of these findings for crime control and for American inequality?

The concentration of the risk of imprisonment among America's most marginal men and the harm thereby inflicted on the lives of their romantic partners and children have profound implications for the nation's crime control policy. Whereas stable employment and family ties discourage crime, incarceration limits labor market opportunities and breaks tenuous family ties. Having stably married parents and positive role models discourages boys from engaging in delinquency, yet parental incarceration often leads to union dissolution, thereby pushing fathers away from children. It also promotes further antisocial behavior among fathers. In so doing, mass incarceration may cause crime in both the short and long term.

Important as the unanticipated criminogenic effects of mass imprisonment may be, the effects on racial and class inequality may be even more consequential. As parental imprisonment has changed from an extremely rare to a common experience in the life course of the children who grow up in fragile families, America has become more unequal. To the degree that the experience of parental imprisonment has long-lasting negative effects on the children of the prison boom, effects of mass imprisonment on inequality will persist well into the future. By further diminishing the life chances of the children

who grow up in fragile families, mass imprisonment may entrench a vicious circle in which the disadvantages wrought by being born into a fragile family are further compounded by the criminal justice system, thereby generating greater future inequality.

Policy Prescriptions

The research that we have reviewed shows that incarceration contributes to family breakup and adds to the deficits of poor children. Despite almost universal agreement that strong families are a powerful source of social order and public safety, U.S. crime policy has, in the name of public safety, produced more vulnerable families and probably reduced the life chances of their children.

To avoid contradictions like this, policy makers must ask of any proposed reform: what will it do to families? Changes in criminal sentencing over the past thirty years offer a prime example. In at least two areas, punitive sentencing has had substantially negative effects on families. First, the widespread adoption of mandatory minimum prison sentences for drug crimes has incarcerated many men without significant histories of violence. Ironically, the families of these previously nonviolent men appear to have suffered the largest negative effects. Policy reform in this area would thus significantly limit prison time for drug offenders. Second, re-imprisoning parolees for violating the technical conditions of their parole has also incarcerated great numbers of men who pose relatively little risk to public safety. Technical parole violators have not necessarily committed new offenses, but have been sent back to prison for missing appointments, failing drug tests, or violating other conditions of parole.

For both drug offenders and parole violators, inexpensive and effective alternatives to

incarceration are available. They include intensive community supervision, drug treatment where necessary, and a system of graduated sanctions that allows parole and probation officers to respond quickly to violations without sentencing offenders to disproportionately severe prison time. In Project HOPE in Hawaii, for example, probation violators who received swift, certain, but very short jail stays significantly reduced violations and drug use.⁶²

Drug offenders and technical parole violators are the low-hanging fruit for sentencing reform. More ambitious reform would also review sentencing enhancements for repeat offenders, such as three-strikes statutes and truth-in-sentencing measures that require long stays in prison before eligibility for release. Three-strikes, truth-in-sentencing, and related measures have increased time served in prison, severely straining family ties and multiplying the costs to families of visitation.

Policies to support men and women returning home from prison could further reduce the costs to fragile families of high rates of incarceration. Though such programs exist, we suggest strengthening existing programs and making them more widely available. So-called prisoner reentry policies begin while men and women are still in prison. Substance abuse, education, training, and work programs are aimed at reducing recidivism and preparing incarcerated men and women for life in free society. Because prisoners average less than a twelfth-grade education, expanded educational programming in prison seems an urgent priority. The federal prison system, which houses about 10 percent of all prisoners, provides a good model for the states by mandating 240 hours of school programming for all prisoners

without high school degrees. Improved literacy and more schooling would likely benefit fragile families by enhancing formerly incarcerated fathers' economic opportunities and, perhaps, the quality of their parenting. Vocational and work programs in prison are also associated with significant reductions in recidivism, as long as ten years after prison release.⁶³

After release, prisoner reentry efforts often help men and women connect to services and job opportunities. Reentry programs provide transitional services for housing, treatment, education and training, and job placement. Recent evaluations suggest that when such services are offered immediately after prison release, they can reduce recidivism and improve employment among ex-prisoners. In particular, transitional employment programs that place former inmates in small crews to work on construction and community service projects have been found to reduce recidivism significantly several years after entry into the program.⁶⁴ A few programs, such as Family Justice (formerly La Bodega de la Familia) in New York, involve family members and friends directly, enlisting them to support former prisoners in readjusting to the routines of free society and in participating in drug treatment programs.⁶⁵

Though sentencing reform and prisoner reentry policy can help reduce the negative effects of incarceration on fragile families, perhaps the most effective proposals lie outside the sphere of criminal justice. Criminal justice reform, by itself, will not solve the problems of school failure, joblessness, untreated addiction, and mental illness that pave the pathway to prison in the first place. Chronically idle young men (and increasingly women) with few resources for self-improvement still present a social problem even if they are

not incarcerated at high rates. Ultimately, addressing that problem will require a greater social commitment to education, public health, and the employment opportunities of low-skill men and women.

The great mistake of the prison boom was trying to solve hard social problems through crime policy. Punitive criminal justice not only failed to ameliorate those problems, but achieved only questionable success even as a strategy for enhancing public safety. Taking full account of the negative social effects of incarceration shows that the costs of mass

imprisonment are far higher than correctional budgets suggest. More fundamentally, criminal justice agencies are only residual sources of social order. The primary sources of order and stability—public safety in its wide sense—are the informal social controls of family and work. The disruptive effects of mass incarceration that are concentrated in America's fragile families have weakened these sources of public safety. From this perspective, social policy holds the promise not only of improving the well-being of fragile families, but also, by strengthening families and providing jobs, of contributing to public safety.

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