Family Life in an Era of Mass Incarceration

Christopher Wildeman
Cornell University

October 21, 2015
I promise this is different from the Coates article...
1: What is mass imprisonment?
2: Obstacles to causal inference.
3: How has it affected men?
4: How has it affected children?
5: How has it affected women?
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1: What is mass imprisonment?
Defining mass imprisonment (1)

Two features, according to David Garland.
- The first is sheer size.
- Mass imprisonment implies a rate of imprisonment and a size of the prison population that is markedly above the historical and comparative norm for societies of a certain type.
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U.S. Imprisonment Rates, 1925–1973

Year

Imprisonment Rate (Per 100,000 Population)
U.S. Imprisonment Rates, 1925–2006

Year
U.S. Imprisonment Rates, 1925–2006

United States

Australia

Incarceration per 100,000

Year

1980 1990 2000

200 400 600 800

United States

Australia

Austria

- United States
- Australia
- Austria
- Belgium
- Canada
- Denmark

- United States
- Australia
- Austria
- Belgium
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Belgium

Canada

Denmark

Finland

France

Germany

Ireland

Italy

Japan

Luxembourg

Netherlands

New Zealand

Norway

Portugal
The second feature has to do with concentration.

Imprisonment becomes mass imprisonment when it ceases to be the incarceration of individual offenders and becomes the systematic imprisonment of whole groups of the population.
Defining mass imprisonment (2)

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- Imprisonment becomes mass imprisonment when it ceases to be the incarceration of individual offenders and becomes the systematic imprisonment of whole groups of the population.
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Imprisonment becomes mass imprisonment when it ceases to be the incarceration of individual offenders and becomes the systematic imprisonment of whole groups of the population.
U.S. Imprisonment Rates by Gender, 1925–2003

- **Total**
- **Male**

![Graph showing the imprisonment rates for total and male populations from 1925 to 2003, with a significant increase in male imprisonment rates after 1980.](image-url)
U.S. Imprisonment Rates by Gender, 1925–2003

- **Total**
- **Male**
- **Female**

**Imprisonment Rate (Per 100,000 Population)**

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<th>Age</th>
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Percent of men incarcerated on any day by race and age, 2006

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2: Obstacles to causal inference
Two models

- Formerly incarcerated men have much more trouble getting a job than men who have never been imprisoned. Why?
- Causal model: Incarceration $\rightarrow$ Labor market trouble.
- Spurious model: Alcohol/drug abuse + behavior problems + few skills/networks $\rightarrow$ Incarceration + labor market trouble.
- How to figure out which one it is?
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Testing for effects

- One way: An audit study.
- Idea: Get similar people. Have them apply for real jobs. Alternate who was incarcerated. See if it affects employment.
- This deals with spuriousness because incarceration is not associated with applicant qualifications in the experiment.
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Effects of Incarceration on Job Callbacks

Percent Called Back

- Total
- Black
- White

No Record
Effects of Incarceration on Job Callbacks

Percent Called Back
0.0
0.1
0.2
0.3
0.4
Record
No Record
That is a very strong research design

- We rarely have evidence that strong.
- Take all causal language from here with a grain of salt.
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3: How has it affected men?
Two preliminary statements

- I move through this quickly because it isn’t my focus.
- Important to differentiate between effects on individual men and effects on inequality among men. Different things.
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Individual-level effects are substantial

- Consider just earnings, marriage, and HIV/AIDS.
- Earnings: Between a 30 and 40 percent reduction.
- Marriage: Dramatic effects of current incarceration.
- HIV/AIDS: Again, undeniably large (delayed) effects.
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But the effects on inequality are often small

- Focus just on black-white inequality here.
- Earnings: About a 3 percent increase in inequality.
- Marriage: Imperceptibly small effects here as well.
- HIV/AIDS: Explains nearly all of the black-white difference.
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Why such small effects on inequality?

- Constrained by starting distributions.
- Men who experience incarceration are at the very low end of the earnings distribution and have little chance of marrying.
- Under those conditions, inequality can only increase a small amount because their chances were already slim – even if unequally distributed and huge effects on individual men.
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4: How has it affected children?
Children of the prison boom

- My work has thus considered effects on childhood inequality.
- Children’s life-chances are far less determined, which means that effects on childhood inequality could be far greater.
- Also allows me to consider effects on future inequality.
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Specifically, I have considered the following question:

How has mass imprisonment affected black-white inequality in children's (1) mental health and behavioral problems, as well as their risks of (2) homelessness and (3) infant mortality?
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- How has mass imprisonment affected black-white inequality in children’s (1) mental health and behavioral problems, as well as their risks of (2) homelessness and (3) infant mortality?
How did I do it?

- I showed disparities in the risk of paternal imprisonment.
- I estimated individual-level effects of paternal incarceration.
- I aggregated up to show effects on childhood inequality.
How did I do it?

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Child's Age vs. Proportion Having Experienced Paternal Imprisonment

**White Children**
- College: 1978
- HS: 1978
- Drop: 1978
- College: 1990
- HS: 1990
- Drop: 1990

**Black Children**
- College: 1978
- HS: 1978
- Drop: 1978
- College: 1990
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- Drop: 1990
Percent Change Due to Incarceration

- Homelessness
- IMR
- Total
- Internalizing
- Externalizing
- Aggression

Categories:
- Low
- High

Percent Change Due to Incarceration:
- 0
- 50
- 100
- 150
Black–White Gaps, No Incarceration

- Homelessness
- IMR
- Total
- Internalizing
- Externalizing
- Aggression

Percent Difference

0 50 100 150
But there’s just one wrinkle

- My argument applies only to paternal incarceration.
- Maternal incarceration is an entirely different story.
- Totally different scale and likely less negative effects.
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5: How has it affected women?
A disclaimer

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- Both in terms of the social patterning.
- And in terms of the effects on women.
- But the initial signs are very bad...
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1 in 4
And this experience is consequential

▶ Harmful effects on mental and physical health.
▶ Harmful effects on household finances and stress.
▶ Some paradoxical benefits, especially in the short-term.
▶ But it makes a bad situation worse more often than not.
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Conclusion

- Mass incarceration has widened childhood inequality.
- The magnitude of estimates ranges from about 10 percent for total behavioral problems to 65 percent for homelessness.
- Likely applies not only to children but also women.
- Even if the imprisonment rate returned to 100 per 100,000 today, the ripple effects of mass imprisonment on inequality would last at least one more generation. We have only seen a glimmer of the effects of mass imprisonment on inequality.
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Thanks for inviting me