Children of the Prison Boom:
Mass Incarceration and Childhood Wellbeing

Sara Wakefield

School of Criminal Justice, Rutgers
sara.wakefield@rutgers.edu
Children of the Prison Boom Mass Incarceration and the Future of American Inequality

Sara Wakefield
Christopher Wildeman

Frequent Collaborator:
Chris Wildeman (Yale)

Also see the work of Kristin Turney (UC-Irvine)

Funders:
Russell Sage Foundation, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, University of Minnesota
Plan of talk

① Linking Mass Incarceration and Childhood Wellbeing

② Individual-Level Effects of Parental Incarceration on Children

③ Implications for Social Inequality and Long-Term Harm

④ Undoing the Damage
1. Mass Incarceration

Linking Mass Incarceration and Children
What is mass incarceration?

- Historically novel, comparatively extreme.
- Common life experience for the urban poor.
- Resulting in the “systematic incarceration of whole groups.”
U.S. Incarceration Rate 1925-2005
## Risk of imprisonment by age 30-34: Men born 1945-49, 1970-74

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Born 1945-49</th>
<th>Born 1970-74</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All White Men</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Non-College</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS Dropout</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS Only</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Black Men</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>22.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Non-College</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>30.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS Dropout</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>62.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS Only</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Risk of imprisonment by age 30-34: Men born 1945-49, 1970-74

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Born 1945-49</th>
<th>Born 1970-74</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All White Men</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Non-College</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>HS Dropout</strong></td>
<td><strong>4.2</strong></td>
<td><strong>14.8</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS Only</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Black Men</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>22.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Non-College</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>30.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>HS Dropout</strong></td>
<td><strong>14.7</strong></td>
<td><strong>62.5</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS Only</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Percentage of Children with an Incarcerated Parent

Source: Western & Pettit, 2009
2. Parental Incarceration Effects

Mental Health and Behavioral Problems, Homelessness, Infant Mortality, and Caregiver-Child Relationships
Summary of Findings

For Fathers:
- Global and consequential
- Nearly always in the direction of harm for non-violent fathers

For Mothers
- Variable and less consistent
- As often protective as harmful?

Larger Implications
- The Concentration of Incarceration in Families
- Social Inequality and Race Gaps in Childhood Wellbeing
Isolating Incarceration Effects

- Prior Disadvantage
- Incarceration
- Future Disadvantage
Mental Health and Behavioral Problems: All children experience some of them, and they predict everything from dropout to teen pregnancy to crime.

Homelessness: Good insight into most marginalized children, and massive increases in black-white gaps since 1980.

Infant Mortality: Considered the best measure of child health, and black-white inequalities have stubbornly held steady.

Caregiver-Child Relationship: possible important mechanism
Mental Health and Behavioral Problems

Internalizing Behavior

Externalizing Behavior

Total Behavior

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Descriptive</th>
<th>All Controls</th>
<th>With Prev. Behavioral Problems</th>
<th>With Unobserved Traits</th>
<th>Matched Pairs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Significance</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The significance levels are indicated by asterisks: ** for p < 0.01, * for p < 0.05.
Physically Aggressive Behaviors

Source: Fragile Families & Child Wellbeing Study
Notes: ***p<.001, **p<.01, *p<0.5
Physically Aggressive Behaviors by Crime Type and Abuse History

Source: Fragile Families & Child Wellbeing Study
Notes:**p<.01
Risk of Homelessness

Source: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study
Notes: ***p<.01, *p<0.5
Positive and Negative Parenting Behaviors and Conflict Resolution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive Parenting Behaviors</th>
<th>Negative Parenting Behaviors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional/Verbal Responsivity</td>
<td>Negative Conflict, Non-Physical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Climate</td>
<td>Negative Conflict, Physical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Conflict Resolution</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Graph showing the relationship between positive and negative parenting behaviors and conflict resolution.
Summary of Individual-Level Findings

- Paternal incarceration increases:
  - Behavioral problems
  - Physically aggressive behaviors
  - Homelessness
  - Infant mortality
  - Risk of conflict, abuse, and neglect by caregivers

- Effects usually absent in cases of a violent father or a history of domestic abuse in the family

- The incarceration of a non-violent father is a global harm for children
3. Aggregating Up Harms
The Concentration of Incarceration in Families and Social Inequality
Count of Close Blood Relatives Incarcerated

Neither Parent Incarcerated

Father Incarcerated
Count of Close Blood Relatives Incarcerated

Neither Parent Incarcerated

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3

Mother Incarcerated

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3
Race Differences in the Concentration of Incarceration in Families

- **Three or More**: Black Children vs. White Children
- **Two**: Black Children vs. White Children
- **One**: Black Children vs. White Children
- **Zero**: Black Children vs. White Children

Legend:
- **Black Children**: Dark Gray
- **White Children**: Light Gray

Data ranges from 0% to 80%.
The Contribution of Paternal Incarceration for Racial Inequality in Childhood Wellbeing

1990 Levels of Incarceration (Vs. Zero Incarceration)

1978 Levels of Incarceration (Vs. Zero Incarceration)
4. Undoing the Damage

Summary and Unanswered Questions
When we think about the forces that shape wellbeing among American children, we tend to think mostly about things like neighborhoods, schools, and families.

The penal system ought to be added to the list.
Even if incarceration rates returned to 100 per 100,000 tomorrow, the ripple effects of our national experiment in the mass incarceration would last at least one more generation.

Optimism about current reductions in the imprisonment rate and the resilience of children must therefore be set against the backdrop of the children of the prison boom—a lost generation now coming of age.
Undoing the Damage

- Interventions best found outside of the criminal justice system
  - Enhancing social safety net
  - Strengthening interventions in the poorest neighborhoods to reduce the damaging effects of crime and incarceration

- *Smart* reductions in the incarceration rate
  - For children with currently incarcerated parents
  - To reduce the likelihood of the experience for children at risk for parental incarceration
Thanks for your time!

Questions?
Wakefield, Sara. “Accentuating the Positive or Eliminating the Negative? Father Incarceration and Caregiver-Child Relationship Quality.” *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology.*


An unrelenting prison boom, marked by stark racial disparities, pulled a disproportionate number of young black men into prison in the last forty years. Parental imprisonment has been transformed from an event affecting only the unluckiest of children—those with parents seriously involved in crime—to one that is remarkably common, especially for black children. Drawing upon broadly representative survey data and interviews, I describe the devastating effects of America's experiment in mass incarceration on a generation of vulnerable children tied to these men. Parental imprisonment has become a distinctively American way of perpetuating intergenerational inequality—one that should be placed alongside a decaying public education system and concentrated disadvantage in urban centers as a factor that disproportionately touches, and disadvantages, poor black children. More troubling, even if incarceration rates were reduced dramatically in the near future, the long-term harms of our national experiment in the mass incarceration of marginalized men are yet to be fully revealed. Optimism about current reductions in the imprisonment rate and the resilience of children must therefore be set against the backdrop of the children of the prison boom—a lost generation now coming of age.