

The influences of social disruption, social isolation and political disaffection on adult imprisonment trends

Ph.D Dissertation

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Abstract

This study used a longitudinal research design to examine the factors that contributed to the growth in incarceration rates in the United States from 1952 to 2000. A variety of criminal justice system factors have been proposed as integral to the growth of imprisonment. Previous research on trends in incarceration rates, however, has found that violent crime explains only a moderate proportion of the growth in the use of imprisonment, and property offending explains almost none of the increase. National correctional populations, for instance, increased at the same time that crime and victimization rates decreased.

Controlling for the influences of economic instability, violent crime, unemployment, direct outlays for assistance, the percentage of population that is black, and the percentage of males aged 15 to 29 years, this study examined the influences of political disaffection, social isolation and social disruption on adult imprisonment trends. Net of the other factors, political disaffection was strongly associated with three of the dependent variables, and social isolation was positively associated with two of the dependent variables.

In addition to examining the main effects of these variables this study also examined whether violent crime and economic instability condition the effects of political disaffection, social isolation or social disruption on the use of imprisonment. Consistent with the hypothesis was the finding that violent crime and economic instability condition the effects of political disaffection and social isolation such that these variables exert a stronger positive impact on the time served of prison inmates when economic instability or violent crime are increasing. Contrary to the hypotheses, however, the analyses demonstrated that political disaffection, social disruption and social isolation exert a stronger negative influence upon imprisonment rates and prison admissions when rates of violent crime or economic instability are increasing.