

Beyond the Prison Bars: Examining the Relationship between Paternal Incarceration, Maternal Stress and Parenting Behaviors

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Over the twentieth century, incarceration has dramatically increased in the United States. As recently as 2009 over 7.3 million men and women were under some form of correctional supervision (Glaze 2010). Moreover, incarceration is unevenly distributed throughout the population: African-American men are 7 times more likely to be incarcerated than white males and 3 times more likely than non-Hispanic males (Western and Petit 2010).

In response to the growing risk of imprisonment, a burgeoning academic literature has examined the patterns and implications of primarily male incarceration. Research suggests that incarceration has a variety of unintended consequences for individuals and families and—given its associations with low socioeconomic status—may exacerbate cumulative disadvantages for particular groups. For example, incarceration is associated with a reduction in employment opportunities and wages for ex-offenders (Geller et al 2006) and negatively impacts marital stability (Lopoo and Western 2006).

In spite of the prevalence of incarceration, there is a lack of empirical research examining the effects of imprisonment on partners and families of former offenders. Since the majority of men who go to prison are fathers, mothers are often left in the role of rearing the children alone (Glaze and Maruschak 2008). The link between incarceration, maternal stress and parenting capacity is particularly important because this may be one pathway through which parents transmit disadvantage to their children. Incarceration involuntarily removes a parent from a household and adds a unique set of strains to a family's life. Indeed, recent empirical evidence has shown that controlling for associated covariates, higher levels of parenting stress are associated with negative parenting behaviors (Taylor et al 2009). And forthcoming empirical evidence indicates that paternal incarceration increases a mother's risk to experience depression and life dissatisfaction (Wildeman et al forthcoming). Because of the wide-ranging consequences of incarceration, it is important to understand how incarceration may contribute to the intergenerational transmission of inequality (Wakefield and Uggen 2010).

Since incarceration represents one form of father absence, one might expect that imprisonment of a parent to affect the family in similar ways as demonstrated in the literature on single parenthood (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). According to McLanahan and Sandefur, living in a single parent household “deprives children of important economic, parental and community resources” (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994:3). However, partners of imprisoned offenders not only must cope with the challenges of single parenthood, but they must also manage the difficulties associated with the logistics and stigma of imprisonment. For example, Mills (2004) showed that families may suffer because they lack information about visiting procedures. There are added burdens associated with maintaining contact with prisoners (as opposed to another absent parent), including navigating adequate transportation to prisons (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, Joest 2003). Also, Travis and Waul (2003) demonstrate that there is economic strain associated with imprisonment because families have to pay for visits as well as sending money to prisoners.

This may be especially troubling because over half of fathers in state prisons indicate that they provided the primary financial support to their children (Glaze and Maruschak 2008).

Certainly, the incarceration of a partner compromises individual and family well-being. Family members of the incarcerated must adjust to the cultural responses from societal institutions. Some wives of the imprisoned indicate hostility from their social networks and communities (Fishman 1990). Research suggests that the social stigma of incarceration may prompt partners of incarcerated men to withdraw from social networks (Braman 2004), resulting in a reduction of such networks available for support. Additionally, Fishman's (1990) ethnographic account of prisoners' wives show that as a result of the stigma of incarceration shame can lead to feelings of anger and rejection. Above and beyond the stigma, Comfort's (2008) work indicates that partners of inmates undergo a process of "secondary prisonization," whereby the family members become socialized to the activities and culture of imprisonment. She argues that this process transforms the women's social lives and therefore impacts their conduct with others. This process may create conflict and resentment among the loved ones of the imprisoned.

In this paper, I use data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a longitudinal survey of parents of children born in urban areas, to examine the effect of imprisonment on maternal stress and parenting behaviors. The study includes 4,897 births that occurred between 1998 and 2000 in 20 cities with populations over 200,000. The Fragile Families Study is uniquely suited to study these empirical research questions because it provides a robust set of demographic and social characteristics associated with incarceration. This sample includes not only self-reports of imprisonment, but multiple sources of information about incarceration. Using this data, I examine the association between incarceration and certain parenting behaviors: physical aggression, psychological aggression, neglect, and parenting stress. I examine possible mechanisms through which paternal incarceration may affect mothers' parenting behaviors. In addition, I pay particular attention to the variation in these relationships across racial and ethnic lines.

I use OLS regression to examine the factors that affect stress and parenting behaviors. I begin with a simple model of incarceration and stress and in a progressive fashion I add covariates that are associated with these outcomes. Because unobserved heterogeneity poses an empirical problem to my research question, I then use fixed effect regression which is a more conservative estimate to control for stable family characteristics over time. Finally, I use propensity score models to test the robustness of these relationships.

Preliminary results suggest that recent paternal incarceration is significantly associated with an increase in parenting stress, physical and psychological aggression against the child. However, there is no association between both prior and recent incarceration and child neglect. These results suggest that beyond increasing material hardship, paternal incarceration comprises maternal well-being and parenting effectiveness. My findings can provide information about how incarceration impacts families and the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage. I also discuss the implications of these findings for future research and public policy.

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