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The Unequal Consequences of Mass Incarceration for Children

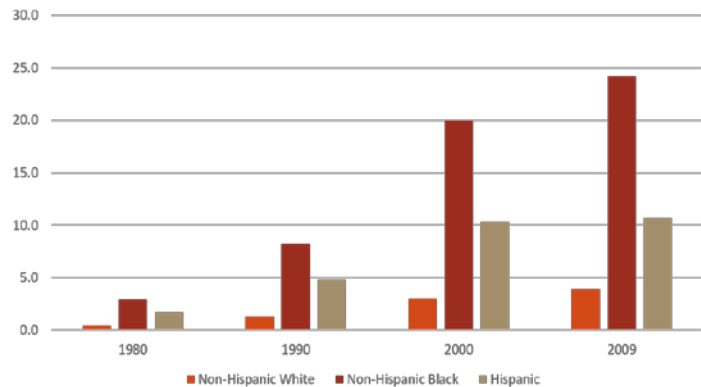
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The rapid growth of mass incarceration in the U.S. means that a historically unprecedented number of children grow up with incarcerated parents, especially incarcerated fathers. Scholars have documented that, by and large, paternal incarceration has harmful consequences for children across the course of their lives and, given its concentration among the disadvantaged, may increase inequality among children. Past research most often considers the average effects, paying particular attention to disentangling the effects of incarceration from the effects of other factors associated with incarceration such as poverty, neighborhood disadvantage, and criminal behaviors. However, the same factors that shape children's risk of experiencing paternal incarceration—the demographic, socioeconomic, and behavioral characteristics of their parents—may also shape children's responses to paternal incarceration.

Key Findings:

- ◆ Not all children are similarly likely to experience paternal incarceration. One-third of urban children experience paternal incarceration by age 9.
- ◆ Paternal incarceration is consequential for the behavioral and cognitive outcomes of all children. But children are differentially affected by paternal incarceration.
- ◆ The consequences for children's problem behaviors and cognitive skills in middle childhood are diverse and vary with the social contexts that shape children's risk of experiencing paternal incarceration. Problem behaviors and cognitive skills shape educational and occupational attainment, as well as delinquency throughout life.
- ◆ Taking into account children's risk of experiencing paternal incarceration, measured by the social contexts in which children are embedded, reveals that the consequences—across all outcomes except early juvenile—are more harmful for children with relatively low risks of exposure to paternal incarceration.

Cumulative Risk of Parental Incarceration by Age 17, by Race and Ethnicity



(Bryan L. Sykes and Becky Pettit. "Mass Incarceration, family complexity, and the reproduction of childhood disadvantage.")

Implications for Policy

The fact that problem behaviors and cognitive skills may have lasting implications for future delinquency, as well as educational and occupational success, suggests that the penal system may shape inequalities in childhood and throughout the course of life. Documenting the diverse intergenerational consequences of paternal incarceration for children's well-being is crucial for constructing an "incarceration ledger"—defined by Sampson (2011) as the countervailing costs and benefits of incarceration—and precisely documenting how incarceration contributes to intergenerational social inequality. Children may benefit from reducing incarceration rates and from family interventions to improve parental relationships and economic self-sufficiency. Children with relatively high risks of experiencing paternal incarceration are an especially disadvantaged group and policy efforts might focus on social issues that disproportionately affect these children (such as poverty and parental substance abuse.)

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