



What Scholars Know - And Need to Learn - About the Social Effects of Mass Incarceration

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U.S. prisons have swelled for decades. Even though new admissions have recently trailed off a bit, more than 2.3 million people are currently held in jails and prisons, while many more live under some form of criminal justice system surveillance. Obviously, incarceration affects the prisoners themselves, but it also has major consequences for those to whom they are closely tied. Romantic partners and children, especially, must learn to get along without the incarcerated loved one, and then adapt yet again when the prisoner is released and returns to family life. Such disruptions associated with imprisonment especially affect already disadvantaged and marginalized groups in American society, often exacerbating racial and economic inequalities.

Scholars have already learned quite a bit about the “collateral consequences” of mass incarceration. Yet much more remains to be pinned down, and there are challenges researchers must surmount to arrive at valid understandings of such indirect social effects.

What Researchers Have Learned

It is well established that, by and large, incarceration brings damaging consequences for prisoners themselves – contributing, among other things, to wage loss, family disruptions, and health problems (especially after a person is released from prison and loses regular health care). Loss of political rights even after prison is another frequent consequence of serving time.

Beyond these immediate woes for prisoners and ex-prisoners, recent studies have tried to unravel consequences for family members and sum up how mass imprisonment influences important social trends and racial gaps. Here are some of the most important findings so far.

- Children of incarcerated fathers – but not children of imprisoned mothers – are more likely than other children from similar backgrounds to experience homelessness, an especially severe social disadvantage. Black children of imprisoned fathers are especially hard hit.
- Compared to other children, grown up sons and daughters of imprisoned parents are less likely to vote or engage in community service; they have lower trust in government and are more likely to perceive that they are discriminated against.
- The prison boom of recent times has made the measurement of U.S. educational trends and racial inequalities in education less accurate, because most research has relied on nationally representative data sources that systematically exclude individuals residing in jails and prisons. Because prisoners serving time have, on average, lower levels of educational attainment than non-prisoners, leaving them out paints an overly rosy picture of overall U.S. educational attainment. Racial gaps are also underestimated when so many less-educated black male prisoners are overlooked.

Research Frontiers and Challenges

Research on the collateral social consequences of incarceration may have burgeoned, but more remains to be learned – and there are tricky research challenges to surmount.

- **Teasing out True Causal Effects.** Those who spend time in prison or jail, as well as people tied to them, are far from a random slice of the entire American population. People who end up being sent to prison are often already disadvantaged in many ways – with low incomes and education, and troubled family lives – so any finding that imprisonment is associated with social or psychological difficulties for the prisoner and his or her family members may not be pointing to a true cause and effect relationship. To fully pin down whether incarceration exerts an independent effect on the lives of prisoners and their

family members, researchers must develop more sophisticated and rigorous research designs and find new and better kinds of data on how lives unfold for prisoners and their families, compared to non-prisoners of similar backgrounds.

- **Noting and Probing Apparent Non-Relationships.** Researchers certainly need to learn more about how incarceration affects prisoners and their families, but it is equally important to discover how incarceration *does not* affect people. When researchers look for connections between imprisonment and other social problems but do not find them in good data carefully analyzed, they should report such “null findings” to the larger research community. Scholars can then probe more deeply, to see if offsetting things are going on at the same time. For example, it is quite possible that the incarceration of a family member hurts some romantic partners and children, but actually makes things better for others. Both could happen and cancel each other out in a large data compilation. Pinpointing what is really going on may require additional investigations, such as interviews with family members or observations before and after a family member goes to prison. A combination of research approaches is likely to be necessary to give scholars and policymakers a full understanding of the complex social side-effects of incarceration.
- **Collecting Better Data.** So far, most quantitative research on the effects of imprisonment has depended on analyzing data not originally collected for this purpose. Data on large groups of people may offer rich information on standard social indicators, but often do not go into great detail on people’s experiences with going to prison or dealing with the incarceration of a family member. Information may not be available on key issues like how long a prisoner serves, or how far away the prison is from family members. Such factors matter for teasing out the social effects of imprisonment, so to better grasp key processes, researchers will need to mount imaginative new data collection efforts.

America’s prison boom has had many consequences – including a burst of studies on the social implications for the families and neighbors of prisoners. Improved public policies to help such people who are often innocent collateral victims depend on the best research. And researchers have more to learn, which they can do with better evidence and improved research designs.

Read more in Kristin Turney, “Incarceration and Social Inequality: Challenges and Directions for Future Research.” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 651, no. 1 (2014): 97-101.