



Do Inmates' Families Do Better or Worse Depending on Whether Fathers are Sent to Jails or to State or Federal Prisons?

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Serving time in jail or prison is a very common experience in the United States – especially for poor and working-class African American men. As incarceration has boomed during the last several decades, researchers and policymakers have become increasingly interested in understanding the impact not just on the prisoners themselves, but also on their families and associates. Many effects have been explored, but so far researchers have not probed whether the detrimental impacts on families and communities are influenced by where the inmate is incarcerated. Does it make a difference if men are held in local jails, state prisons, or federal prisons?

Our study takes a first step towards addressing this gap using information on the facilities in which fathers from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study are incarcerated. Using these data, we examine whether associations between current paternal incarceration and family functioning varies by the locale of imprisonment. To generate as many insights as possible, we use many different measures of family functioning.

Differences between Jail and Prison

Most previous research on the social and economic impacts of incarceration on family life has focused only on prison inmates – or has simply lumped prison and jail inmates together. But this overlooks the many meaningful differences between jails and prisons, variations that could very well lead to different consequences for inmates' families.

- **Family visits** are affected by the type of incarceration. Compared to convicts sent to state or federal prisons, jail inmates tend to be incarcerated closer to home and to their families, which may make family visits easier. However, prisons at both the state and federal levels tend to have more structured and transparent rules and guidelines about visits with inmates, so it could be that such rules allow for less stressful and more consistent interactions between inmates and family members.
- **Conditions of confinement** differ by types of institutions. Because jails tend to offer fewer physical and mental health services than prisons, family members may feel the effects of varied levels of health for their imprisoned family or household members, both while the inmates are behind bars and after their release. In addition, jail inmates face greater uncertainty about their terms, because the majority of jail inmates have not yet been sentenced and are simply awaiting trial. Variations in the length of jail terms or levels of uncertainty about how long a family member will be held may cause psychological distress or make family planning and regular contact more difficult. However, family ties are typically much more strained – or even broken – when people go to prison, because most prison inmates serve longer sentences, are imprisoned further away from family and friends, and are more likely to be placed in solitary confinement while incarcerated.

We can, in short, develop hypotheses about possible family effects from jail or prison incarceration. But the lack of comparison between the two settings in existing research makes it difficult to know how the specific consequences for families may vary – or not.

Findings about Effects on Families

Consistent with prior research that pools jail and prison inmates together, we find that current incarceration of any sort is associated with worse outcomes for families, even after accounting for a number of other social and demographic characteristics that might be related to family life. Compared to families in which the father is not incarcerated, the families of fathers held in jails or prisons do worse, regardless of the type of institution in which the father is held. When the father is currently incarcerated, we find that the child's mother and father are more likely to have separated and the child's mother is more likely to have begun a relationship with a new romantic partner.

Somewhat surprisingly, however, we do not find evidence of systematic variations in family impacts from the imprisonment of fathers in various types of facilities. Although incarceration – of any kind – is associated with multiple difficulties and disruptions for the families of those imprisoned, our analyses do not suggest that it is any “better” or worse for the families of prisoners to have them held in a particular type of institution.

The bottom line is that, overall, jails, state prisons, and federal prisons put similar strains on the families of incarcerated fathers. This is an important finding, because so much research emphasizes the negative effects of long prison stays on families. Our results, by contrast, suggest that even short stays in jail can prove harmful to the families of imprisoned men.

Implications for Future Research and Policy

Taken together, the initial findings of our research underline the negative spillover consequences of incarceration on family life, no matter where imprisonment occurs. We do not find consistent differences across local jails, state prisons, and federal prisons – which suggests the need for a closer look by researchers at conditions in local jails and the experiences of those held in such settings. As such research proceeds, close attention should be paid to the implications of jails for the family ties of inmates, as jails may have negative consequences comparable to prisons, even if the specific processes vary.

Policymakers as well as researchers have a stake in more detailed research that explores the secondary effects for families of incarceration in various institutional settings, especially local jails versus state or federal prisons. With so many Americans still flowing into and through the nation's jails and prisons, we can use all the systematic findings available to mitigate unintended and detrimental consequences for the family members of those who are sentenced to confinement.

Read more in Christopher Wildeman, Kristin Turney, and Youngmin Yi, “Paternal Incarceration and Family Functioning: Variation across Federal, State, and Local Facilities.” *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 665, no. 1 (2016): 80-97