In 2008, 1 out of every 100 adults in the United States was incarcerated (Pew Center, 2008). Rates of incarceration are historically higher among men and the most disadvantaged, and these groups have experienced a disproportionate increase in their rates of incarceration from 1980 to 2008 (Western and Wildeman, 2009). Using the National Longitudinal Study of Youth 1997 (NLSY97), this Profile provides an analysis of young men’s contact with the criminal justice system (i.e., probation or incarceration) by the age of 25. The sample is composed of 4,599 men.

Educational Attainment

• Figure 1 shows as men’s educational level increases, the likelihood that they have had contact with the criminal justice system by age 25 declines precipitously.
  ○ Nearly 40% of young men with a GED have had contact with the criminal justice system followed by one-third of young men with less than a high school degree.
  ○ Among men with a high school degree, almost equal proportions experienced incarceration as probation.
  ○ Among men with some college or more, the most common form of contact with the criminal justice system was probation rather than incarceration.

Race/Ethnicity

• Figure 2 illustrates Black men are more likely to have had contact with the criminal justice system by age 25 than men of other racial/ethnic groups.
  ○ White men are similar to Hispanic men in regard to overall criminal justice contact (16% and 17%, respectively), but White men more often experienced probation than incarceration.
  ○ Among young Black men, almost 18% were incarcerated and only 4% placed on probation.
Fatherhood

- Men who have experienced a birth by age 25 are more likely to have had contact with the criminal justice system compared to those who did not have a child (Figure 3).
  - Among young fathers, roughly 29% have been either incarcerated or placed on probation by age 25.
  - One-fifth of young fathers have been incarcerated by age 25 compared to only 6 percent of men without children.

Union Formation

Figure 4 illustrates the relationship between contact with the criminal justice system and union formation by age 25.

- Men who formed cohabiting relationships only are more likely than those who cohabited and married to have had contact with the criminal justice system by age 25.
  - Almost 19% of cohabitors have been incarcerated compared to only 11% of those who cohabited and married and 6% of those who did not form a union.
  - In regard to probation, of those who cohabited and married, a little over 6% have been placed on probation compared to almost 11% of cohabitors and 6% of those who did not form a union.
- Men who cohabited and married are more likely to have had contact with the criminal justice system compared to those who did not form any union.
  - Young men who cohabited and married are more likely to have been incarcerated than those who did not form a union.

Sources:


1In 2008, all men in the sample are over age 25.