Fathers and Fathering in the Era of Mass Incarceration

Christopher Wildeman
Yale University

May 24, 2012
Goals for this talk

- Social patterning.
- Effects on families.
- Policy implications.
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- Historically novel.
- Comparatively extreme.
- Highly concentrated.
- Accumulates.
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Incarceration Rate over time in different countries:

- **United States**: Incarceration rate increased significantly from 1985 to 2005.
- **United Kingdom**: Incarceration rate remained relatively stable from 1990 to 2005.
- **Spain**: Incarceration rate showed an upward trend from 1990 to 2005.
- **Netherlands**: Incarceration rate remained relatively stable from 1985 to 2005.
- **Denmark**: Incarceration rate remained relatively low and stable from 1985 to 2005.
- **Austria**: Incarceration rate remained relatively stable from 1985 to 2005.
U.S. Imprisonment Rates by Gender, 1925–2003

Year

Imprisonment Rate (Per 100,000 Population)

Total

Male

0  200  400  600  800  1000

1940  1960  1980  2000
Percent of men incarcerated on any day by race and age, 2006

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White Children

Proportion Having Experienced Paternal Imprisonment

Child's Age

Black Children

Proportion Having Experienced Paternal Imprisonment

Child's Age
The diagram presents the proportion of children experiencing paternal imprisonment compared to their age. It is divided into two sections: White Children and Black Children.

White Children:
- The graph shows the proportion of White children who have experienced paternal imprisonment from 1978 to 1990.
- The proportion increases with age, indicating a higher incidence of imprisonment for older children.

Black Children:
- The graph depicts the proportion of Black children experiencing paternal imprisonment.
- A clear upward trend is observed from 1978 to 1990, suggesting an increase in the incidence of imprisonment over time.

The x-axis represents the child's age, ranging from 2 to 14 years. The y-axis indicates the proportion of children having experienced paternal imprisonment, ranging from 0.0 to 0.5.
White Children

Proportion Having Experienced Paternal Imprisonment

Child's Age

Black Children

Proportion Having Experienced Paternal Imprisonment

Child's Age

College: 1978
White Children

Proportion Having Experienced Paternal Imprisonment

Child's Age

Black Children

Proportion Having Experienced Paternal Imprisonment

Child's Age
White Children

Proportion Having Experienced Maternal Imprisonment

Black Children

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Child's Age

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Child's Age
Effects on families

- Paternal wellbeing.
- Family functioning.
- Maternal wellbeing.
- Child wellbeing.
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- Quantitative work suggests mostly harm – labor market, family structure, civic engagement, and a host of others.
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- Not much.
- A couple good, fairly recent qualitative studies.
- Tend to suggest harm – at least in the long-term.
- Very little quantitative – financial contributions, maternal support and hardships, and amount of paternal involvement.
- Again, point toward harm.
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Child wellbeing

- A slightly smaller mountain than for adult men.
- Much more quantitative (which makes sense given IRB).
- I stress studies of young kids – easier for causal.
- Robust association with acting out – both as physical aggression and externalizing – but less so for internalizing.
- Also pushes kids further to the margins – increases their risks of homelessness and infant mortality, to name just a few.
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- Used a host of strategies – covariate adjustment, propensity scores, sample restrictions, fixed effects, and placebos.
- Still hard to be certain the effects are causal.
- In my opinion, this is just how social science is, but it complicates suggestions in terms of what we should be doing.
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- Attend to social problems with policies that invest in the poorest communities rather than with criminal justice policies.
- Cutting the imprisonment rate by 25 percent would lead to 400,000 less prisoners. At a rate of $24,000 per prisoners per year, that's a savings of $9.6 billion. (Simplistic, I know.)
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- Enhance services to families experiencing incarceration.
- Even if incarceration doesn’t cause harm, many of these families are in dire straits and could use additional services.
- So one broad policy (that helps all in poor communities) and one targeted one (that helps the most marginalized families).
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