



FATHERS AND FATHERING IN THE ERA OF MASS INCARCERATION

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The American imprisonment rate has skyrocketed from a fairly stable rate of about 100 prisoners per 100,000 in the early 1970s to about 500 per 100,000 prisoners in the contemporary era. Yet the American imprisonment rate is not only historically novel, as our current rate of incarceration also dramatically exceeds those of all other wealthy democracies. The risk of imprisonment, furthermore, is highly unequally distributed by race, class, and neighborhood. The combination of the unequal social patterning of imprisonment and the historical and comparative novelty of the contemporary American rate of incarceration has been referred to as mass incarceration, mass imprisonment, the prison boom, hyperincarceration, and the carceral state, to mention just a few names. The goal of this essay to acquaint the audience with the potential implications of mass incarceration for fathers and fathering, focusing on: (1) the social patterning of the risk of paternal imprisonment; (2) the consequences of paternal imprisonment for family functioning, as well as paternal, maternal, and child wellbeing; and (3) the policy implications of these findings.

To briefly summarize my argument, I show that paternal and, albeit to a lesser degree, maternal imprisonment have become common experiences for poor and minority children—especially for poor, minority children. African American children born in 1990 had about a 25 percent chance of having their father imprisoned at some point; for African American children with fathers who did not complete high school, the risk was slightly over 50 percent. The risks for white children—even those whose fathers dropped out of high school—are not even in the same ballpark, suggesting that mass imprisonment may have important consequences for racial and class inequality in children's family contexts and outcomes, provided experiencing this event has negative consequences. Testing for such effects is, of course, nearly overwhelmingly difficult. Nonetheless, the majority of the admittedly small body of research on family functioning, paternal wellbeing, maternal wellbeing, and child wellbeing suggests that the incarceration of a father has negative consequences in each domain—with some important contingencies. There is, for instance, some evidence that the incarceration of an abusive man provides respite for some women and children. These initial findings aside, future research must more rigorously consider these four sets of outcomes in order to provide stronger evidence for exactly when paternal incarceration helps, harms, and has no effect on the women and children left behind—as well as the fathers who experience incarceration. Given uncertainty about the effects of the incarceration of a father on family life, policy recommendations should be made with caution. Nonetheless, as paternal imprisonment represents a new stage in the life-course of poor and minority children, if some of the associations shown in existing research represent causal effects, policy might try to (1) shift more toward solving deep social problems with social welfare policies over criminal justice ones and (2) invest resources in minimizing the harm done by paternal incarceration.