

Contemporary Patterns in the Impact of Mass Incarceration on Racial and Educational Differences in Union Formation

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Introduction

The expansion of the criminal justice system has become a stratifying force exacerbating prior inequality for disadvantaged groups. Between 1975 and 2005, the incarceration rate increased fivefold (Maguire and Pastore, 2007). In 2012, approximately 2.2 million individuals were in prison or jail, and an additional 4.7 million adults were on probation or parole (Glaze and Herberman, 2013). Incarceration has become a modal event in the lives of young low-educated minority men. African-American men are seven times more likely to be incarcerated than white males and three times more likely than Hispanic males (The Pew Charitable Trust, 2010). Additionally, for non-college graduates the proportion who will ever be in prison is greater than 30 percent for all black men (Western and Wildeman, 2009).

In response to contemporary mass incarceration, academic literature has examined the impact not only on individuals, but for their families and communities as well (Geller et. al, 2011; Murray and Farrington, 2008; Clear, 2008). Recent research suggests that for the former and current romantic partners of incarcerated men, incarceration compromises their wellbeing (Comfort, 2008; Turanovic, Rodriguez, and Pratt, 2012), increases the risk for mental health challenges (Wildeman, Schnittker, and Turney, 2012), and results in a loss of income and social support (Schwartz-Soicher, Geller, and Garfinkel, 2011; Turney, Schnittker, and Wildeman 2012). Despite escalating attention to the collateral consequences for families, little research examines the demographic ramifications for mating patterns. Given the negative economic, political, and social implications of incarceration (Pager, 2003; Western 2002; Uggen and Manza, 2002; Wakefield and Uggen, 2010), it is important to understand patterns of family formation because it may shed light on the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage. This paper estimates the cumulative probability that a woman will either marry or cohabitate with an incarcerated man.

Background

Concurrently, with the rise of incarceration, profound transformation in family behaviors affects the context in which individuals make decisions about family formation. An extensive literature documents a divergence in family patterns by race/ethnicity, and social class. According to estimates, 81% of non-Hispanic White women, 77% of Hispanic women, and 52% of non-Hispanic Black women were predicted to marry by age 30 (Bramlett and Mosher, 2002). As young adults have delayed marriage, cohabitation has increased for all racial/ethnic groups over the past two decades (Manning, 2013). The lack of “marriageable men” is the most prominent explanation in the black-white difference in marriage (Wilson, 1987). Wilson argued that the disproportionate prevalence of incarceration and unemployment among Black men depletes the supply of economically attractive men who earn family supporting wages. While research has found some support for the lack of “marriageable men” hypothesis (Litcher et al., 1992), few studies have examined the effect of incarceration on union formation.

Because incarceration is unevenly distributed throughout the population, and considering historical patterns in racial endogamy, I anticipate that incarceration is likely to disproportionately influence the mating choices of Black lower-educated women. I apply life table techniques using longitudinal data to distinguish the impact of incarceration by comparing cohorts of women over time.

Data and Measures

In order to estimate the cumulative risk of partnering with an ever incarcerated man, it requires indicators of whether women married or cohabitated with a man who has a prior incarceration history at specific ages. Unfortunately, no such data exists which directly measures attachment to ever incarcerated individuals. However, I am able to leverage multiple longitudinal data sources which identifies marriage and cohabitation histories, and incarceration spells for connected partners. In this paper, I use data from three sources: The Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (1997), and The Fragile Families and Child Well-being Study (Fragile Families).

The PSID is a nationally representative longitudinal survey that began in 1968 with 4,800 households. These families and their descendants were re-interviewed annually from 1968 to 1997, when interviews continued on a bi-annual basis. The PSID is uniquely suited to addressing this research question precisely because I can examine cohort changes in the impact of incarceration on mating patterns over time. Between 1968 and 1977, the PSID did not distinguish between marriage and cohabitation. After 1978, PSID identifies the legal marital status of the household head, which allows a distinction between those who are married and those who are cohabitating. Additionally, I can identify whether a respondent is incarcerated based on if he/she was incarcerated at the time of the interview. Short spells of incarceration may be underestimated given that individuals who were incarcerated previously to the interview will not be identified using this measure. In 1995, the PSID administered a criminal justice involvement questionnaire which describes whether individuals have ever been incarcerated previous to the interview and the timing of the latest release. I supplement these measures in my analysis to minimize measurement error.

The NLSY97 is a nationally representative sample of 9,000 youth who were between 12 and 17 years old at the initial 1997 survey. Youths were annually followed in their transition to adulthood, with the most recent interview collected in 2011. NLSY97 includes monthly measures of individuals marital and cohabitation status. Also, respondents are asked to establish whether any adults in their household was in jail in the past five years. If respondents responded in the affirmative, they were then asked to describe the relationship status with the relative and their age in which the event occurred.

Finally, I use data from the Fragile Families Study, a longitudinal survey intended to provide information about urban parents and their children. The study includes 4,898 children born between 1998 and 2000 in 20 metropolitan areas with populations over 200,000 (Reichman et al., 2001). The survey contains an oversample of nonmarital births and a comparison group of married parents, therefore the sample is overrepresentative of socioeconomically disadvantaged families. Mothers were interviewed in the hospital within 48 hours after giving birth. Fathers were interviewed in the hospital or as soon after the birth as possible. Both mothers and fathers were interviewed at this baseline year, and at the child's first, third, fifth, and ninth birthdays.

This urban sample allow me to follow disadvantaged men who are often underrepresented in household surveys (Hernandez and Brandon, 2002). At each interview, mothers report their relationship status not only with the child's father, but if she romantically involved with a different partner. Also, the Fragile Families dataset includes multiple sources of information about incarceration, which helps ease problems associated with social desirability bias. Both parents are asked to describe whether the father was ever incarcerated previous to the interview. The major limitation with this measure is that I am unable to determine the timing and duration of father's incarceration spell.

Methods

I use life tables to estimate the cumulative risk that a woman will wither marry or cohabite with a man who has an incarceration history by age 35. I focus my attention on cohorts born after 1960 given that incarceration began to rapidly increase in 1975. The life table is a tool demographers typically use to study mortality, but has been applied to other areas of research. Recently, social demographers have used this technique to examine the impact of incarceration on individuals and families (Petit and Western, 2004; Wildeman, 2009). I follow this line of research to address the present research question.

Life tables measure whether events occur between intervals of time. Using the various data sources, I am unable to determine concurrent relationship status and the timing of partner's incarceration. However, I can identify whether individuals have been connected to a partner with an incarceration history at specified ages. Even the ambiguity of this measure moves the research forward given the dearth of estimates on the impact of incarceration on mating patterns. I further supplement my analysis using three data sources.

Implications

Whom one partners with matters over the life course in regards to health, wealth, and outcomes for children (Waite, 1995). Recent research suggests that incarceration contributes to inequality for already disadvantaged groups. I bring two lines of literature together: one which describes changing patterns of family behaviors, and the other which details the social consequences of incarceration in an effort to show another mechanism through which incarceration transmits disadvantage across generations.

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