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# Incarceration and Social Inequality: Challenges and Directions for Future Research

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The dramatic rise in mass incarceration in the United States, which began in the mid-1970s and has continued mostly unabated, means that incarceration is a commonly experienced life course event for an increasing number of individuals. Indeed, about 3 percent of adults in the United States currently endure some form of correctional supervision, including the 2.3 million individuals incarcerated and the additional 4.9 million individuals on probation or parole (Glaze 2011). Though the historically unprecedented rates of incarceration are remarkable, one of the most striking facets of mass incarceration is its unequal distribution across the population. Incarceration is concentrated among poorly educated minority men living in disadvantaged communities, and even within demographic groups, incarceration results from social forces such as differential involvement in crime and variation in exposure to police surveillance (Wakefield and Uggen 2010). Though about only 3 percent of white men born between 1965 and 1969 were incarcerated by their mid-30s, this was true of about one-fifth (21 percent) of black men and nearly three-fifths (59 percent) of black men without a high school diploma or GED (Pettit and Western 2004).

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In response to these historically unprecedented rates of incarceration, especially among disadvantaged groups of the population, a growing literature documents the consequences of incarceration for individuals, families, and communities. Incarceration impairs men's economic well-being (Western 2006), romantic prospects (Massoglia, Remster, and King 2011), civic engagement (Uggen and Manza 2002), and health (Wildeman and Muller 2012), and the systematic concentration of incarceration among disadvantaged groups may maintain or exacerbate social inequality among American men and those connected to them (Wakefield and Uggen 2010). But the differential selection of men into incarceration makes estimating a causal effect of incarceration difficult, and as such, understanding the consequences of mass incarceration for social inequality is a challenging endeavor. In this volume, three articles—using an array of theoretical perspectives, data sources, and methodological techniques—adroitly extend our knowledge of the influence of incarceration on social inequality. Below, I discuss the unique contributions of each of these articles and then suggest three ways that researchers can theoretically and empirically extend investigations on this topic.

### Contributions to Research on Social Inequality

The three articles in this volume (Ewert, Sykes, and Pettit; Lee, Comfort, and Porter; and Wildeman) make important theoretical, methodological, and substantive contributions to research about incarceration and social inequality (and, specifically, racial inequality). In the article by Stephanie Ewert and colleagues, for example, the authors use data from the Current Population Survey and three surveys of the incarcerated (Survey of Inmates in Local Jails, Survey of Inmates in State Correctional Facilities, and Survey of Inmates in Federal Correctional Facilities) to make a novel and compelling argument that mass incarceration has implications for racial inequality in educational attainment. The authors show that conventional ways of measuring educational attainment in the United States—through population-based surveys of households—systematically exclude individuals serving time in prisons and jails and, therefore, dramatically overestimate educational attainment among black men and dramatically underestimate disparities in educational attainment between black and white men (also see Pettit 2012). This argument—that the exclusion of incarcerated individuals distorts population-based estimates—is relevant not only to scholars of punishment, inequality, and education but also to the large number of researchers and policy-makers who use household surveys when making other population-based estimates. For example, for those studying family formation, the exclusion of incarcerated men, who have lower than average marriage rates, from household-based surveys means that marriage rates among black men are likely overestimated.

Another article in this volume, authored by Christopher Wildeman, also directly tackles the contribution of incarceration to racial inequality. Wildeman takes a different approach, using data from the Fragile Families and Child

Wellbeing Study (FFCWB), to consider the implications of paternal incarceration for one form of severe disadvantage, child homelessness. Through a rigorous analytic approach that carefully considers differential selection into incarceration, at least to the extent possible with observational data, Wildeman demonstrates that the consequences of incarceration for children are quite nuanced: paternal, but not maternal, incarceration increases homelessness among children, and the consequences of paternal incarceration are concentrated among black children. This article is distinct from most other research considering the effects of incarceration on child well-being because it considers the possibility that the effects may vary across race (though see Wakefield and Wildeman 2011). Given that many children experience paternal incarceration and that black children are more likely than white children to suffer from paternal incarceration and endure more deleterious effects, incarceration likely increases racial inequality among children (at least with respect to child homelessness).

Finally, similar to Wildeman, Hedwig Lee and colleagues consider how the consequences of incarceration spill over to those connected to the incarcerated. In this article, the authors ambitiously use three data sources to consider how the incarceration of a family member (defined as a romantic partner or parent) is broadly associated with perceptions of meritocracy and fairness. Analyses of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) show that parental incarceration is associated with a reduced likelihood of voting, a reduced likelihood of engaging in community service, greater perceived discrimination, and less trust in the government. Analyses of the Relate data, a novel sample of men recently released from prison and their romantic partners, show that these romantic partners report low opinions, ambivalence, and distrust in authorities connected to the criminal justice system, and these findings are complementary to their results from qualitative interview data. More generally, the article by Lee and colleagues suggests that by only considering the consequences of incarceration for the incarcerated, and by ignoring the “secondary prisonization” experienced by those connected to the incarcerated (Comfort 2008), researchers and policy-makers may substantially underestimate incarceration’s deleterious consequences for social inequality.

## Directions for Future Research

Research on incarceration and social inequality has burgeoned in recent years, and the articles in this volume expertly add to this literature, but there are three important directions for future research on this topic. First, research on incarceration and social inequality must continue to rigorously interrogate issues of social selection. Incarceration, as discussed, is not a random event but is instead one patterned by individual, structural, and contextual disadvantages. Therefore, even the most rigorous research designs (such as those using fixed-effects or propensity score modeling strategies) are limited because they cannot consider both time-invariant and time-varying unobserved characteristics that may render an association between incarceration and an outcome spurious. For example, the

negative association between parental incarceration and government trust that Lee and colleagues find may result from unmeasured factors such as respondent mental health, delinquency, or incarceration history. In the Wildeman article, the association between paternal incarceration and child homelessness may result from time-varying paternal characteristics such as criminal activity. Given the difficulties associated with conducting experimental research and the infeasibility, in most instances, of randomly assigning men to incarceration, issues of social selection plague nearly all research on this topic. When considering how incarceration maintains or exacerbates social inequality, researchers should continue to employ rigorous research designs and exploit creative strategies whenever possible (i.e., instrumental variables, natural experiments). But researchers should not abandon questions when establishing causality, as correlational studies can advance theory and provide informative evidence about the social world.

Second, future research should continue to investigate null findings. In this volume, Wildeman finds that maternal incarceration does not increase child homelessness and that paternal incarceration does not increase child homelessness among white children. Lee and colleagues also come to some null conclusions, finding that parental incarceration is not associated with registering to vote, attending political rallies, contributing money, and contacting the government. These findings are consistent with other research finding null average effects of parental incarceration (Wildeman and Turney, forthcoming), null effects for some outcomes but not others (Geller et al. 2012), null effects for some groups of the population (Turney and Wildeman, forthcoming), or null effects for current but not previous incarceration (Porter and King 2012). Null findings could result from several different processes. Perhaps most obviously, a null finding may mean that incarceration simply has no effect on an outcome. But a null finding may also result from offsetting positive and negative effects. Understanding the processes behind these null effects (e.g., why incarceration is associated with homelessness among black children but not white children) is crucial for developing a comprehensive theoretical framework about the collateral consequences of incarceration on social inequality.

Finally, to advance theoretical and empirical knowledge about incarceration and social inequality, the comprehensiveness and availability of data must be enhanced. As evidenced by findings from the article by Ewert and colleagues, surveys designed to be representative of a population should strive to include incarcerated men and women. Some surveys, such as the FFCWB or Add Health, have been successful at interviewing individuals in prisons and jails, but even these surveys include limited or no information about incarceration experiences, contact with family members during incarceration, and short- and long-term living situations after release. Though it is not always cost-effective to interview respondents in prison, studies of families and children (such as the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study–Kindergarten Cohort [ECLS-K], where children's mothers are almost always primary respondents) should consider adding questions about paternal incarceration. Even basic questions, enquiring about current paternal incarceration and paternal incarceration since the last survey wave, would be useful in documenting how the incarceration of a father

is consequential for inequalities in women's and children's well-being. Another possibility, and one that could consequentially advance knowledge on this topic, is to link survey data with administrative records. Taken together, by interrogating issues of social selection, understanding the meaning of null effects, and advancing the availability of data on incarceration experiences, researchers could advance theoretical perspectives and empirical findings on incarceration and social inequality in a relatively short amount of time.

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