Mass Incarceration and Inequality

COMPAS (Conversations on Morality, Politics, and Society) Conference on Inequality

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Brief Comments

- When Does Inequality Matter?
- How Mass Incarceration Reflects Inequality and How Mass Incarceration Creates Inequality
U.S. Incarceration Rate 1925-2005
Incarceration Rate per 100,000 by Country, 2013

- Denmark
- Germany
- Netherlands
- France
- Italy
- Croatia
- Canada
- England & Wales
- Saudi Arabia
- Turkey
- Israel
- South Africa
- Russia
- Rwanda
- Cuba
- United States

Context

Cross-National Comparison
### Risk of imprisonment by age 30-34: Men Born 1945-49 & 1970-74

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Born 1945-49</th>
<th>Born 1970-74</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All White Men</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Non-College</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS Dropout</td>
<td>4.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>HS Only</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Black Men</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>22.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Non-College</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>30.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>HS Dropout</td>
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<tr>
<td>HS Only</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>20.3</td>
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<td>4.9</td>
<td>8.5</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Mass Incarceration and Inequality

- Mass incarceration reflects and reinforces inequality
- The influence of mass incarceration in the direct creation of inequality is less clear for some outcomes
Three examples

1. Labor market outcomes and earnings
2. Marriage and divorce
3. Parental incarceration
Mass Incarceration and Inequality

- The lifetime risk of imprisonment is unequally distributed.
- The effects of imprisonment on individuals are often large.
- But the effects on inequality are often quite small.
Black men are 8 times more likely to go to prison than white men.

And it causes a 30 percent reduction in earnings.

But it increases inequality between black men and white men by only 3 percent.
2. Marriage is similar

- Black men are 8 times more likely to go to prison than white men.

- And it **causes** a 20 reduction in the chance of marrying.

- But it increases marriage inequality by only **4 percent**.
Effects on inequality are constrained by the starting distribution.

Men who go to prison are at the low end of the earnings distribution and have a low probability of marriage anyway.

Under those conditions, inequality can only increase a small amount—even in the presence of very large differences in rates of imprisonment and large individual-level effects.
To be clear…

- This is not to say that incarceration doesn’t matter for adult men.
- Of course it does.
3. Parental Incarceration (here’s where it matters a lot)

- Black children are 13 times more likely to experience the incarceration of a father.

- And it **causes**:
  - a 5% increase in behavioral problems,
  - a 25% increase in aggression,
  - a 97% increase in homelessness (for Black children),
  - and a 48% increase in infant mortality
The Children of the Prison Boom

- Mass incarceration has widened inequality in childhood wellbeing
- The consequences are particularly perverse as they fall on the most vulnerable of children
- Even if the imprisonment rate returned to 100 per 100,000 tomorrow, the ripple effects would continue for at least one more generation.
Challenges for Justice

The genius of the current caste system, and what most distinguishes it from its predecessors, is that it appears voluntary. People choose to commit crimes, and that's why they are locked up or locked out, we are told.

(Michelle Alexander, The New Jim Crow)

The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons.

(Fyodor Dostoyevsky)
Thanks!

For more information, sources, or questions:
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For more research, resources, or 140 characters on soccer and Manchester City:

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Federal system sets the tone but doesn’t change the level
Context and Selection

Prisons and Processing as a Black Box
The Funnel Model of the Criminal Justice System

1,000 Crimes Committed?

500 Crimes Reported

100 Arrests

65 Charges

30 Dismissals
23 Guilty Pleas
7 Trials (3 Acquitted)

9 Probation Sentences

18 Incarceration Sentences
Context

Imprisonment Vs. Incarceration
Context

Jail Cycling
Implications

- It’s time to move beyond never/ever comparisons
- Distinguishing parental criminality and parental punishment (handling selection)
- Tackling who is in prison and why and how this influences families
  - Uncomfortable but simultaneously true facts about justice, violence, and inequity
  - Legitimacy concerns
Thanks!

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1. Risk: we show disparities in the risk of paternal imprisonment.
2. Harm: we show the effect of paternal imprisonment on mental health and behavioral problems, homelessness, and infant mortality.
3. Baseline Inequality: we show what the gap is without paternal imprisonment.
4. Increase in Inequality: we show what happens to the existing gap when accounting for varying levels of imprisonment.
4: Aggregating up

- This is how we do it for externalizing behaviors.
- Zero incarceration: \( \frac{\text{Black}}{\text{White}} = \frac{9.3}{7.4} = 1.26 \).
- Absolute difference at zero incarceration is 1.9 \((9.3 - 7.4)\).
- Average (of high and low estimates) change in externalizing behaviors associated with paternal incarceration is 1.97.
- Risks in 1990: **25.1** for black children; **3.6** for white children.
Showing the calculations

Change in inequality:

\[
\frac{\text{Black}_{1990} - \text{White}_{1990}}{\text{Black}_0 - \text{White}_0}.
\]

\[
\frac{(((9.3 \times 0.749) + ((9.3 + 1.97) \times 0.251))) - (((7.4 \times 0.964) + ((7.4 + 1.97) \times 0.036)))}{9.3 - 7.4}.
\]

\[
\frac{9.80 - 7.46}{9.3 - 7.4} = \frac{2.34}{1.9} = 1.24.
\]

So it increased inequality about 24%. 