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Implications of Mass Imprisonment for Inequality among American Children

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In 1973, the American imprisonment rate began an ascent from which it has only recently deviated. In just over thirty-five years, the rate grew fivefold, from roughly 100 per 100,000 people to roughly 500 per 100,000. Although the incarceration rates of comparable nations have also grown over the same period, none approaches that of the United States. England, the nation with the second-highest incarceration rate among long-standing Western democracies, incarcerates its residents at a rate one-fifth as high as that of the United States (Western 2006: 14).

Imprisonment has long been a topic of penological and criminological inquiry, but in recent years it has gained the attention of scholars of social, political, and economic inequality as well. Studies of the relationship between imprisonment and inequality fall into two broad categories: those focusing on imprisonment as a reflection of inequality and those focusing on imprisonment as an engine of inequality. The first category of research examines racial and economic disparities in the chances of imprisonment—whether, in other words, some groups are more likely to experience imprisonment than others. The second asks whether imprisonment itself might exacerbate already existing racial or economic inequalities.

In the first strand of inequality research, two facts are glaringly clear. First, racial disparity in the risk of imprisonment is stark. African Americans have drastically higher lifetime risks of imprisonment than comparable white men at every level of educational attainment. Whereas about one in five African American men can expect to go to prison at some point in his lifetime, only about 3 percent of white men can expect the same (table 1; Western and Wildeman 2009: 231). These disparities are not new; racial disparity in imprisonment long preceded the prison boom (Muller 2012).

Second, racial inequality in contact with the penal system widens as one de-

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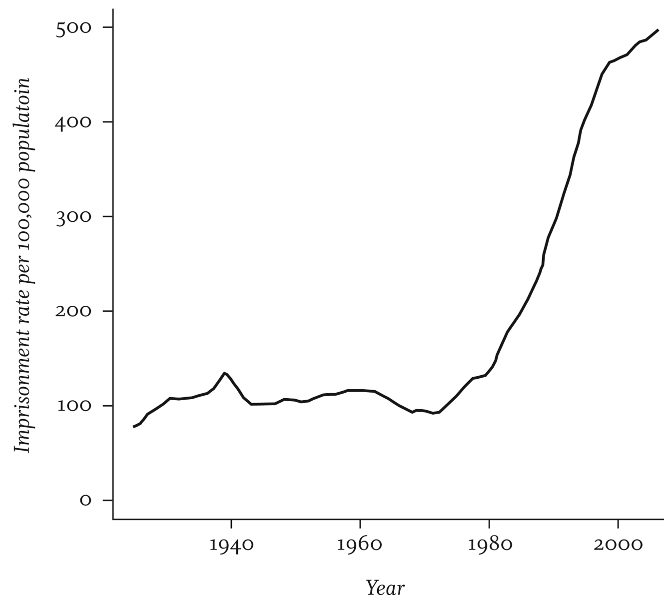
Figure 1.
U.S. imprisonment rates, 1925–2006



scends the hierarchy of educational attainment. This facet of inequality in an individual's chances of imprisonment is newer (Pettit 2012). By their mid-thirties, for example, African American male high school dropouts born in the late 1970s had nearly a 70 percent chance of having ever been imprisoned—a risk about five times that of comparable men born thirty years earlier. This fact leaves little doubt that widening economic inequality in American society at large finds expression in class disparities in imprisonment.

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The second strand of research on imprisonment and inequality sets itself a more formidable challenge. It asks whether the experience of incarceration itself can generate inequality. Identifying the effect of imprisonment alone is especially difficult given the conclusions of the first strand of research reviewed above. If social inequalities so strongly determine the distribution of prison inmates, how can one distinguish the effects of going to prison from the effects of being the type of person likely to go to prison? Findings in this area are scanter, but offer suggestive evidence that imprisonment diminishes men's economic viability (e.g., Lewis, this volume; Western 2002; Western and Beckett 1999), increases their risk of marital dissolution (e.g., Lopoo and Western 2005), compromises their health (e.g., Johnson and Raphael 2009; Massoglia 2008a, 2008b; Schnittker and John 2007), and diminishes their political participation and civic engagement more broadly (e.g., Weaver and Lerman 2010).

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Table 1. Cumulative risk of imprisonment by age 30–34 by race and education for men born 1945–1949 to 1975–1979

	Birth cohort						
	45–49	*50–54*	*55–59*	*60–64*	*65–69*	*70–74*	*75–79*
White men							
High school dropouts	4.2	7.2	8.0	8.0	10.5	14.8	15.3
High school only	0.7	2.0	2.1	2.5	4.0	3.8	4.1
All non-college	1.8	2.9	3.2	3.7	5.1	5.1	6.3
Some college	0.7	0.7	0.6	0.8	0.7	0.9	1.2
All men	1.2	1.9	2.0	2.2	2.8	2.8	3.3
Black men							
High school dropouts	14.7	19.6	27.6	41.6	57.0	62.5	69.0
High school only	10.2	11.3	9.4	12.4	16.8	20.3	18.0
All non-college	12.1	14.1	14.7	19.9	26.7	30.9	35.7
Some college	4.9	3.5	4.3	5.5	6.8	8.5	7.6
All men	9.0	10.6	11.5	15.2	20.3	22.8	20.7

Source: Western and Wildeman (2009:231).

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Table 2. Percentage of non-Hispanic black and white men, born 1965–1969, surviving to 1999, by life events experienced

Life event	*White men (%)*	*Black men (%)*
All men		
Prison incarceration	3.2	22.4
Bachelor's degree	31.6	12.5
Military service	14.0	17.4
Marriage	72.5	59.3
Noncollege Men		
Prison incarceration	6.0	31.9
High school diploma/GED	73.5	64.4
Military service	13.0	13.7
Marriage	72.8	55.9

Source: Pettit and Western (2004:164).

There is, however, a third strand of research at the nexus of inequality and imprisonment that has yet to receive much attention. It considers the intergenerational durability of inequality stemming from mass imprisonment. As striking as the imprisonment rates discussed at the beginning of the chapter are, they mask the fact that point-in-time measures of imprisonment take a snapshot of a prison

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population that is reproduced day to day and year to year. With a median prison sentence of thirty-six months (Pastore and Maguire 2003: 451), many more individuals in the population have cycled in and out of prisons than are captured by the imprisonment rate. It follows that imprisonment has affected the lives of the children of many more individuals than are currently in prison.

Research on the reproduction of inequality through imprisonment examines outcomes similar to those studied in the research on imprisonment and inequality discussed above. Studies consider either inequality in a child's risk of having a parent go to prison, or the effects of parental imprisonment itself on childhood inequality and well-being. These are the strands of research we discuss in this chapter.

We proceed in two steps. First, we present estimates of racial and educational disparities in the risk of parental imprisonment for two birth cohorts. These estimates (first reported in Wildeman 2009) provide the first comprehensive picture of inequality in children's experience of parental imprisonment. Second, we discuss how imprisonment might disadvantage children and review research on the consequences of parental imprisonment for children's educational achievement, behavioral problems, and risk of experiencing severe forms of deprivation. We close by considering directions for future research on the question of whether mass imprisonment generates durable racial and economic inequality. Whereas other scholars consider the historical causes and contemporary consequences of mass imprisonment, we explore the intergenerational consequences of mass imprisonment for American inequality.

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Inequality in the Risk of Parental Imprisonment

For mass imprisonment to exacerbate racial and economic inequality among American children, it must both be increasingly unequally distributed by race and class and have demonstrable negative effects on children. In this section we consider the distribution of parental imprisonment, discussing recently constructed estimates of the risk of parental imprisonment for black and white children in two birth cohorts, by parental education.

Table 3 presents estimates of the risk of paternal, maternal, and parental imprisonment by age fourteen for black and white children born in 1978 and 1990. The risk of paternal imprisonment for white children was small regardless of their birth cohort. Only about 3.6 percent of white children born in 1990 experienced paternal imprisonment. Risks of maternal imprisonment were even smaller. White children born in 1990 had less than a 1 in 100 chance of experiencing maternal imprisonment.

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Table 3. Cumulative risk of paternal, maternal, and parental imprisonment by exact age for children born in 1978 and 1990, by child's age and race

Age (years)	*Paternal (%)*	*Maternal (%)*	*Parental (%)*
White children			
Born 1978			
Age 2	0.4	0.0	0.4–0.4
Age 6	0.9	0.1	0.9–1.0
Age 10	1.5	0.1	1.5–1.6
Age 14	2.2	0.2	2.2–2.4
Born 1990			
Age 2	0.7	0.1	0.7–0.8
Age 6	1.5	0.2	1.5–1.7
Age 10	2.8	0.4	2.8–3.2
Age 14	3.6	0.6	3.6–4.2
Black children			
Born 1978			
Age 2	2.6	0.2	2.6–2.8
Age 6	6.8	0.5	6.8–7.3
Age 10	9.9	0.8	9.9–10.7
Age 14	13.8	1.4	13.8–15.2
Born 1990			
Age 2	6.3	0.4	6.3–6.7
Age 6	14.9	1.4	14.9–16.3
Age 10	20.2	2.5	20.2–22.7
Age 14	25.1	3.3	25.1–28.4

Source: Wildeman (2009:271). For sources and methods, see Wildeman (2009).
Note: The high estimate for the cumulative risk of parental imprisonment assumes that no children have both parents imprisoned; the low estimate assumes that all children experiencing parental imprisonment have both parents imprisoned.

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The risks of paternal, maternal, and parental imprisonment were much larger for African American children. African American children born as early as 1978—when the American imprisonment rate had just begun to increase—had a 13.8 percent chance of experiencing paternal imprisonment. By 1990 that risk had grown to 25.1 percent. The risk of maternal imprisonment for black children is also notable—especially in comparison to the risk of paternal imprisonment for white children. Black children have nearly as high a risk of experiencing maternal imprisonment (3.3 percent) as white children have of experiencing paternal imprisonment (3.6 percent). This fact is especially striking given that men make up the vast majority of America's prisoners. For black children born in 1990, the risk of having a parent imprisoned at some point by age fourteen (28 percent) ex-

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Table 4. Cumulative risk of paternal and maternal imprisonment by exact age for children born in 1978 and 1990 by child's race, and parental education

	White children				Black children			
	Paternal (%)		Maternal (%)		Paternal (%)		Maternal (%)	
Age (years)	*1978*	*1990*	*1978*	*1990*	*1978*	*1990*	*1978*	*1990*
ALL NONCOLLEGE								
Age 2	0.6	1.0	0.0	0.1	3.1	7.8	0.2	0.5
Age 6	1.4	2.7	0.1	0.3	7.9	18.5	0.5	1.6
Age 10	2.1	4.3	0.1	0.5	11.4	24.6	0.9	2.8
Age 14	2.9	5.6	0.2	0.8	15.6	30.2	1.5	3.6
HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT								
Age 2	0.9	1.4	0.0	0.1	5.2	14.3	0.2	0.5
Age 6	2.2	3.7	0.1	0.4	13.2	33.3	0.7	2.0
Age 10	3.3	5.8	0.2	0.7	17.7	42.7	1.2	3.8
Age 14	4.1	7.2	0.2	1.0	22.0	50.5	1.9	5.0
HIGH SCHOOL ONLY								
Age 2	0.4	0.9	0.0	0.1	1.2	4.6	0.1	0.4
Age 6	0.9	2.3	0.1	0.3	3.7	11.3	0.3	1.3
Age 10	1.3	3.6	0.1	0.4	6.4	15.8	0.5	2.0
Age 14	2.0	4.8	0.2	0.7	10.2	20.4	0.9	2.6
SOME COLLEGE								
Age 2	0.1	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.8	2.4	0.1	0.3
Age 6	0.4	0.7	0.1	0.1	2.2	6.9	0.3	1.1
Age 10	0.8	1.2	0.1	0.2	3.6	10.6	0.5	1.9
Age 14	1.4	1.7	0.2	0.3	7.1	13.4	1.2	2.6

Source: Wildeman (2009:273). For sources and methods, see Wildeman (2009).

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ceeds the probability of having a college-educated father (27 percent). The figures reported in table 3 demonstrate that imprisonment is sufficiently differentially distributed by race to affect racial inequality in child well-being.

Table 4 presents estimates of the risk of paternal and maternal imprisonment for white and black children by parental education and birth cohort. The estimates suggest that economic inequality in the risk of parental incarceration among whites has grown. Whereas the risk of paternal imprisonment for white children of high school dropouts increased from 4.1 to 7.2 percent over the period, the risk of paternal and maternal imprisonment for white children of college-educated parents scarcely grew at all.

Economic inequality in the risk of parental imprisonment was also large for

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African American children. But despite absolute increases in economic inequality in the risk of parental imprisonment among African American children, unlike white children, they did not experience relative increases. Among black children born in 1978 to fathers who did not complete high school, fully 22.0 percent could expect to experience paternal imprisonment. Even at the beginning of the prison boom, the risk of paternal imprisonment for African American children of low-education parents was relatively large.

Despite long-standing economic inequality in the risk of parental imprisonment among African American children, table 4 indicates that even black children of highly educated fathers were not insulated from the experience of paternal imprisonment. Although the 20.4 percent and 13.4 percent respective risks of paternal imprisonment for black children of high school graduate and college-educated fathers may appear small relative to the alarming 50.5 percent risk for black children of high school dropouts, these risks are roughly similar to those of the children of white high school dropouts.

Tables 3 and 4, in short, report stark racial and economic disparities in the risk of paternal, maternal, and parental imprisonment. Economic disparities in the risk of parental imprisonment grew for white but not black children. Parental imprisonment was commonly experienced even by black children born to college graduates. Among black children born to high school dropouts in 1990, parental imprisonment was modal. These estimates suggest that the risk of parental imprisonment for black children, and especially black children of high school dropouts, is sufficiently large to have important implications for population-level racial and economic inequality among children.

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Consequences of Parental Imprisonment for Children

If the negative consequences of imprisonment for adults are only beginning to be documented, research on the effects of parental imprisonment on children has barely begun. Sharp racial and economic disparities in imprisonment make it particularly important to ask whether the intergenerational effects of mass incarceration might contribute to durable patterns of social inequality. Accordingly, we now turn to the consequences of parental imprisonment for inequality in childhood wellbeing.

Previous studies point to three possible ways parental incarceration might affect children: by (1) conferring stigma, (2) inducing trauma, and (3) causing strain. The stigma associated with having a family member incarcerated can create a sense of social isolation and shame that may lead families to recoil from valuable social interactions (Foster and Hagan 2007; Goffman 1963; Murray and

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Farrington 2008a). As Goffman (1963) demonstrated, stigma travels, attaching itself not only to individuals, but also to their friends and kin. The anticipation of judgment may impede the social integration of already marginal families and children, potentially worsening their health and diminishing their sources of communal, emotional, and economic support (Braman 2004; Schnittker and John 2007). Studies focused on trauma emphasize children's social and behavioral problems resulting from both parental separation and reunification following release (Braman 2004; Comfort 2007). Children express trauma in a variety of ways, from anxiety, confusion, and loneliness to anger, depression, sleep problems, and even developmental regression (Poehlmann 2005). Studies emphasizing strain, finally, consider the social, psychological, and economic challenges facing the children of the incarcerated due to decreased financial support or family disruption and dissolution (Geller, Garfinkel, Cooper, and Mincy 2009; Geller, Garfinkel, and Western 2011; Hagan and Dinovitzer 1999; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Western and Lopoo 2006). Despite the prominence of these mechanisms in the studies cited above, very few of them have been directly tested. To date, only the trauma thesis has found empirical support (Wildeman 2010).

Although most studies suggest that children suffer from parental imprisonment, some children may derive a short-term benefit from the removal—whether through imprisonment or by other means—of an addicted or abusive parent from the home (Wildeman 2010, 2012). Criminological theories of selection and self-control (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990; Wilson and Hernstein 1985), meanwhile, hold that biosocial selection and genetic predisposition largely explain away correlations between parental incarceration and negative child outcomes. Research on the durable effects of mass imprisonment, therefore, must answer the challenges of those who expect heterogeneity in the effects of parental imprisonment on children and those arguing that the association between imprisonment and childhood inequality is driven by omitted variables.

Incarceration does not occur at random in the population. As the discussion above makes clear, the incarcerated are drawn disproportionally from the population of African Americans and the poorly educated (Uggen, Wakefield, and Western 2005; Western and Beckett 1999). Since the children of incarcerated parents are more likely to suffer from forms of socioeconomic disadvantage prior, or in addition to their parent's incarceration, researchers must contend with the possibility that these preexisting differences account for many of the disadvantages the children of incarcerated parents face. Yet most studies exploring the effects of parental imprisonment have been either qualitative or correlational.[1] While these studies provide the kind of useful descriptive statistics and rich portrait of the lives of those touched by incarceration necessary to generate hypotheses about

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the impact of incarceration on children, they cannot address issues of selection and omitted variable bias and therefore provide little empirical evidence about the causal effects of parental imprisonment.

Research to date considers three broad sets of outcomes for children: (1) educational achievement or attainment; (2) behavioral problems or mental health; and (3) the risk of experiencing severe forms of deprivation. At such an early stage of research, investigations into racial and economic differences in the effects of parental incarceration on children are almost entirely absent from the literature.[2] Still, given what we know about the racial and economic distribution of incarceration, studies attempting to show the average effects of paternal incarceration across all racial groups and classes shed light on some potential implications of mass imprisonment for racial and economic inequality.

A handful of studies explore the effects of parental incarceration on child educational outcomes. Since educational attainment is a major engine of stratification in the United States, this research has clear implications for our understanding of racial and class inequality. Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Foster and Hagan (2007) examine the effects of paternal imprisonment on the social exclusion of children during their transition to adulthood. They hypothesize that a father's incarceration reduces his child's educational attainment and ultimately results in the child's adult social exclusion. In a subsequent analysis, Foster and Hagan (2009) attempt more carefully to correct their estimates for selection bias by using propensity score matching.[3] The authors conclude that paternal incarceration has negative effects on children's cumulative GPA as well as their educational attainment, findings that support their claim that paternal incarceration decreases the educational attainment of children in emerging adulthood.

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In a similar study, Haskins (2009) uses the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing dataset and propensity score matching to estimate the effect of paternal incarceration on school readiness. Studying the effect of having a father incarcerated between the ages of one and five, she finds that children who experience paternal incarceration have significantly lower school readiness than their matched controls. Provided that school readiness measures a developmental outcome necessary for successful entry into formal schooling, and that early developmental and cognitive abilities are central to children's later academic success, differences in school readiness may affect children's future academic and labor market trajectories.

Finally, in a set of studies looking at elementary-aged children in the Chicago public schools, Cho (2009a, 2009b) uses a variety of state administrative datasets from Illinois to examine the impact of maternal incarceration on two educational

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outcomes: a child's educational achievement and the probability of being held back in school. Given that grade retention implies a low level of, or decline in, school performance, Cho (2009a) proposes that if a child's likelihood of grade retention increases following the incarceration of his or her mother, maternal incarceration may lead to decreased school performance. She finds instead that having an incarcerated mother slightly reduces the possibility of retention. In a second study examining children's educational achievement and addressing selection and overestimation concerns by using a comparison group composed of children whose mothers spent three or fewer days in jail (as opposed to prison), Cho (2009b) finds that maternal imprisonment is not associated with a decline in academic achievement as measured by standardized math or reading test scores. Together, Cho's findings suggest that maternal incarceration has either no effect or even a potentially positive one for children. The conflicting results of the studies discussed here make it premature to conclude that parental imprisonment negatively affects childhood educational outcomes. Instead, they provide weak support for the hypothesis that there is heterogeneity in the effect of imprisonment on child outcomes.

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Children's educational achievement, advancement, and subsequent attainment often depend on successful sociobehavioral development. The majority of studies on the behavioral effects of parental incarceration focus on child or adolescent outcomes such as aggression, delinquency, or depression. Scholarly emphasis on these areas stems mainly from a criminological interest in the intergenerational transition of criminality. Using longitudinal data from the United Kingdom and a series of comparison groups, Murray and Farrington (2005) estimate the effect of parental imprisonment on boys' odds of exhibiting a variety of externalizing behaviors over their life course.[4] The authors conclude that compared to boys experiencing other forms of parental separation or no parental separation at all, boys who experience paternal incarceration score worse on measured antisocial and delinquency outcomes. It is unclear whether these results generalize to the children of the American prison boom.

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Wildeman (2010), using Fragile Families data, and Wakefield and Wildeman (2011), using data from Chicago alongside multiple comparison groups, explore the associations between parental incarceration and children's physically aggressive behaviors and mental health, respectively. These studies draw upon data that better represent children affected by mass imprisonment in the United States. Wildeman (2010) finds that paternal incarceration increases physical aggression in young boys, but not in girls. Wakefield and Wildeman (2011), employing an expansive measure of behavioral problems, find that parental incarceration negatively affects children's mental health and behavior. In sum, the literature

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addressing the relationship between parental incarceration and children's behavioral outcomes points to consistent negative associations.

The final body of research on the consequences of parental imprisonment proposes that having an incarcerated parent increases children's risk of experiencing severe forms of disadvantage, such as homelessness or entrance into the foster care system. Homelessness is especially likely for children exiting the foster care system or living with a parent who has recently returned from prison (Bernstein 2005). Foster and Hagan (2007) find the paternal incarceration-homelessness tie to be especially strong among adolescent daughters due to their increased exposure to neglect or abuse in the absence of a birth father.

Other research indicates that maternal incarceration increases children's risk of foster care placement. In an investigation of what caused foster care caseloads to double between 1985 and 2000, Swann and Sylvester (2006) find that increases in female incarceration were more important than either the crack cocaine or AIDS epidemics—even more important than increases in paternal incarceration. Childhood risks of permanent parental separation due to maternal imprisonment are especially likely in the wake of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, which speeds the termination of parental rights for children who have been in foster care for fifteen of the last twenty-two months (Travis 2002).

Finally, Wildeman (2012) considers the effects of parental imprisonment on infant mortality. Using state-level data from 1990–2003 and individual-level data from 1990–2003, he finds that state-level infant mortality rates are positively associated with state-level incarceration rates. The recent incarceration of a parent, moreover, increases an infant's risk of early mortality. Providing evidence that the American infant mortality rate is higher than that of comparably developed democracies such as the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Canada, Wildeman (2012) argues that the prison boom may be partially responsible for the United States' singularly high infant mortality rate.

In the aggregate, the evidence on the effects of parental imprisonment on children is suggestive but inconclusive. Most of the literature points to consistent negative associations. Some studies argue that parental incarceration not only exacerbates inequality during childhood, but potentially extends disadvantages into adulthood. Still, the identification strategies of all of the studies examined here could be called into question. Before making strong conclusions about the effects of parental imprisonment on children, we need better evidence, more studies, and especially studies able to make stronger causal claims.

The evidentiary basis of this program of research would be especially enhanced by studies of the race- and class-specific effects of parental incarceration. If the effects of parental incarceration are the same regardless of race and class,

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then mass imprisonment should have large effects on inequality because of the unequal distribution of the risk of parental incarceration. If the effects are larger for white children and children of more educated parents, then the implications of mass imprisonment would be less severe because fewer whites and highly educated individuals compared to blacks and individuals with lower levels of educational attainment experience incarceration. But if the effects are larger for black children and children of low-education parents, then the consequences of mass imprisonment for American inequality could be potentially more detrimental than the already disparate incarceration rate suggests.

Finally, although the results presented in this section suggest that parental incarceration probably disadvantages children, in some cases it may temporarily improve (or at least not harm) child well-being. Scholars have long pointed to the detrimental effects of exposure to violence or abuse on child well-being (see Murray and Farrington 2008a for a discussion). To the degree that incarcerated parents were violent or abusive toward their children before being confined, in some cases parental removal, whether through imprisonment or another means, might provide these children temporary respite. Research considering this possibility is still in its infancy, but two studies indicate that whether a father is incarcerated for a violent offense or was abusive toward a family member alters the relationship between paternal incarceration and child well-being (Wildeman 2010, 2012). This finding is especially noteworthy in light of Jonathan Simon's (this volume) observation that absent changes in the sentences meted out for violent offenders, the American imprisonment rate will not decline dramatically. Above all, it pushes scholars and advocates to consider separately the many facets of a prison sentence. The effects of temporarily removing an individual from a community may differ considerably from the effects of subjecting him or her to the regular surveillance, isolation, and coercion that characterize the prison experience.

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This essay asks whether mass imprisonment might generate durable inequality by restricting the life chances of the children of the incarcerated. Noting that to do so, mass imprisonment would need to be increasingly unequally distributed by race and class, and to affect children negatively, we considered, first, inequalities in a child's risk of having a parent go to prison and, second, how parental imprisonment might affect childhood well-being.

The results of the first inquiry are clear and striking. The risk of parental imprisonment is so large for African American children—especially African American children of high school dropouts—that mass imprisonment could have important population-level implications for inequality in child well-being. Ra-

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cial disparity in parental imprisonment, moreover, is severe. While 1 in 25 white children born in 1990 are at risk of experiencing parental imprisonment, the rate for black children in the same cohort is 1 in 4.

The results of the second inquiry are suggestive, but require additional research. Studies of the effects of parental imprisonment on behavioral problems and mental health, as well as the risk of experiencing severe forms of deprivation, suggest that parental imprisonment may compromise child well-being. To be able to make stronger causal claims, however, we need more and better-identified studies. Recent evidence of heterogeneity in the effect of imprisonment should encourage researchers to compare the consequences for children of incarceration versus other types of parental removal.

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Notes

1. See Hagan and Dinovitzer (1999) or Murray and Farrington (2008a) for comprehensive reviews.
2. But see Roettger and Swisher (2011) for an early exploration of this question.
3. While propensity score matching on observable characteristics most likely reduces bias in their estimates, it cannot solve any potential omitted variable problems (Imai, King, and Stuart 2008).
4. See Murray and Farrington (2008b) for estimates of the effect of imprisonment on internalizing behaviors.

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