



The Prison Boom and the Increased Risk of Homelessness for Black Children in the United States

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Not long ago, accounts of homeless people in America focused on single white men, who indeed made up the majority of those without a sure place to live. A skid row lifestyle, drug and alcohol abuse, mental health problems, and a lack of social ties to people not themselves homeless – these were the realities for homeless white men. But homelessness in America took an unexpected turn starting in the 1980s, when the share of women and children on the streets began to grow.

By now, the United States has unthinkable high numbers of homeless children. Roughly two of every hundred American children find themselves without a home in any given year. Rates of child homelessness are higher in cities, and black children are especially at risk. In New York City, for example, black children are up to 35 times more likely than white youngsters to have lived in a homeless shelter at some point during the last year.

The Scourge of Child Homelessness

The new realities are especially worrisome because even short bouts of homelessness can push the most vulnerable children further behind their peers – exacting a toll that goes beyond the effects of poverty or low-levels of parental education.

Researchers have been able to pinpoint a whole series of extra harms suffered by homeless children. Like adults with no place to call home, homeless children are more often victimized by crime and exposed to infectious diseases. They have little access to health care and face a higher risk of death as well as serious illness. Homeless children also struggle to keep up with their schoolwork. They are more often abused, and they suffer from more mental health problems than children who have stable homes.

Why, exactly, has homelessness recently grown for American children – especially for black children? In recent times, a number of factors have combined to make life more difficult for black women and their children, including shifts in social policies for the poor and a squeeze on affordable housing in many places. Only recently have researchers begun to identify yet another culprit – the prison boom of recent decades that saw so many parents, especially poor and less educated black men, incarcerated during critical stretches of children's lives.

The Role of Mass Imprisonment

As detailed in my two previous Scholars Strategy Network briefs on the family effects of mass incarceration, parental imprisonment has become a regular experience for rising numbers of America's black children. Among the many disruptions caused by having a parent sent to prison, an increased risk of homelessness is one of the most serious. Researchers have found that a father's imprisonment, in particular, has a substantial negative impact on the lives of black children. Here are some of the key findings that tell us how that happens.

- When mothers are sent to prison, their children *do not* face a higher risk of homelessness – presumably because they end up in the foster care system or some other care arrangement. Of course, any time parents go to prison, children face disruptions. But the best evidence suggests that the imprisonment of fathers and mothers leads to different kinds of disruptions. Maternal incarceration leads to placements of children in foster care, while paternal imprisonment increases the risk that children will go homeless.
- Paternal incarceration actually more than doubles the risk of homelessness for black children (increasing the risk by four percentage points). For very poor black children, having a father sent to prison increases the risk up to seven percentage points, leading to very high rates of homelessness for such already vulnerable children.

- This increased risk of homelessness seems to happen because of what happens to the mothers when their partners, the children's fathers, go to prison. Mothers face new family instabilities with fewer social and institutional supports to fall back on. Some experience a downward spiral and end up without a home for themselves and their children.

Heightened Racial Inequalities and Corrosive Effects for Tomorrow's Citizens

The social face of American homelessness has changed in tandem with the prison boom of the late twentieth century – and in part because of it. Isolated white men are no longer the only ones at risk of being on the streets; this risk has grown for black mothers and children, especially those tied to imprisoned fathers. In turn, rising homelessness exacerbates overall racial gaps.

- According to the best estimates, effects on families traceable to the prison boom account for almost two thirds of the increase in racially unequal risks of child homelessness. Housing instability is bad for anyone, but we should especially worry that black children especially face this growing disruption.
- Of course, homelessness has grown due to the recent economic downturn and accompanying instabilities in the housing market. But child homelessness, unequal by race, is not a new or short-term problem. The prison boom has long played a silent but pivotal role in enlarging the black-white gap in child homelessness. For decades, the racially disparate risk of child homelessness has increased even during periods of economic expansion.

Having parents sent to prison makes children's lives more difficult in many ways – yet the particularly severe disruption of homelessness has grown the most for the children of poor black fathers behind bars. Children who experience an accumulation of social blows fall further and further behind, not only in getting ready for good jobs but also in their preparation to become active, trusting citizens. Long after the twentieth century prison boom recedes, therefore, equal citizenship in the United States is just as certain to suffer as equal economic opportunity from the harms inflicted on prisoners' children, including the extra blows delivered by homelessness.

Read more in Christopher Wildeman, “Parental Incarceration, Child Homelessness, and the Invisible Consequences of Mass Imprisonment.” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 651, no. 1 (2014): 74-96.