

## CHILDREN OF IMPRISONED PARENTS – UNINTENDED CASUALTIES OF THE PRISON BOOM

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More Americans are in prison today than ever before. With a fivefold increase since the late 1970s, one out of every two hundred adults is now behind bars. Prisoners are usually seen as individual men or women, as we debate the punishments they deserve. But prisoners themselves are not the only ones punished, because they often have children. The recent U.S. prison boom means that more and more American children are experiencing the trauma and absence of a parent in jail – with unintended but worrisome consequences for the future. Because children of less educated black fathers are much more likely to suffer, new kinds of intergenerational racial disadvantage may grow over time unless the United States takes steps to mitigate the unintended harm of parental imprisonment.

### **Black Children Very Often Have a Father in Prison, and White Children Increasingly Do Too**

- At some point during childhood, one of every four African American children can expect to have a parent – usually his or her father – serving time in prison for more than a year. This is up from one in seven children in 1978, and the true proportion of children today who experience a parent behind bars is actually greater, because the one-in-four figure does not include parents who spend brief stints in jail.
- White children have a parent in prison much less often than black children. Just one in twenty-five white children experience this, yet that is a substantial increase from the late 1970s, when it was just one in forty.

### **Fathers Who Did Not Complete High School are Very Often Imprisoned**

- About a quarter of all African American children have fathers who did not complete high school – and an astoundingly high proportion of them, over half, will have their dads sent to prison at some point.
- The chance that a parent will go to prison is considerable even for the African American offspring of parents who attended college. About thirteen percent of these children can expect to have their fathers imprisoned. By contrast, this happens to less than two percent of white children of college-educated fathers.
- White children of fathers who did not complete high school also stand a good chance of having their dads in prison. About seven percent experience this – so the problems associated with parental imprisonment affect less-privileged whites as well as African Americans.

## Mothers Rarely Go to Prison – Except Black Moms Who Did Not Finish High School

- Mothers end up in prison much less often than fathers. White children whose mothers completed some college have almost zero chance of seeing their mother go to prison.
- The chance of a mother going to prison is higher for African American children – three out of every hundred black children will have this experience at some point.
- As for the offspring of black mothers who did not complete high school, one out of every twenty will experience all the dislocation that goes with having a mother sent to prison. Such children often land in foster care, which increases costs for social services in the states and localities.

## Avoiding the Extra Costs to Society of Parents in Prison

- Much of the debate about the prison boom in America centers around whether putting adult lawbreakers in prisons or jails is the best way to punish them, prevent crime, and prepare ex-prisoners for more productive lives. We also need to think through the effects of various forms of punishment on children – to make sure that we are not inadvertently hurting innocents and raising costs to American society in the long run.
- Children of imprisoned parents are more likely to end up charged with crimes in the future. Many factors might help to explain this, and this fact, in itself, is not an argument against putting lawbreakers behind bars. But the possible risks to children of imprisoned parents mean that we need to learn more about how the children of prisoners are harmed. What difference does it make to see a parent arrested, to visit him or her in prison, and to deal with a prolonged, forced parental absence? Better knowledge will allow governments and civic groups to correct for the ill-effects of parental imprisonment.
- The future of racial inequalities in the United States is also at stake. Children of the prison boom are disproportionately the sons and daughters of African American men with low levels of education – while the children of educated whites almost never experience the ills associated with having a parent in prison. Neglecting to correct for the extra suffering inflicted on many less-privileged black children could leave the United States with an alarmingly intractable kind of growing racial disparity. Future policies about crime and punishment must consider the family consequences – and do all that is possible to protect children and enable them to grow into productive American citizens.

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Read more in Christopher Wildeman, "Parental Imprisonment, the Prison Boom, and the Concentration of Childhood Disadvantage." *Demography* 46, no. 2 (2009): 265-280.