

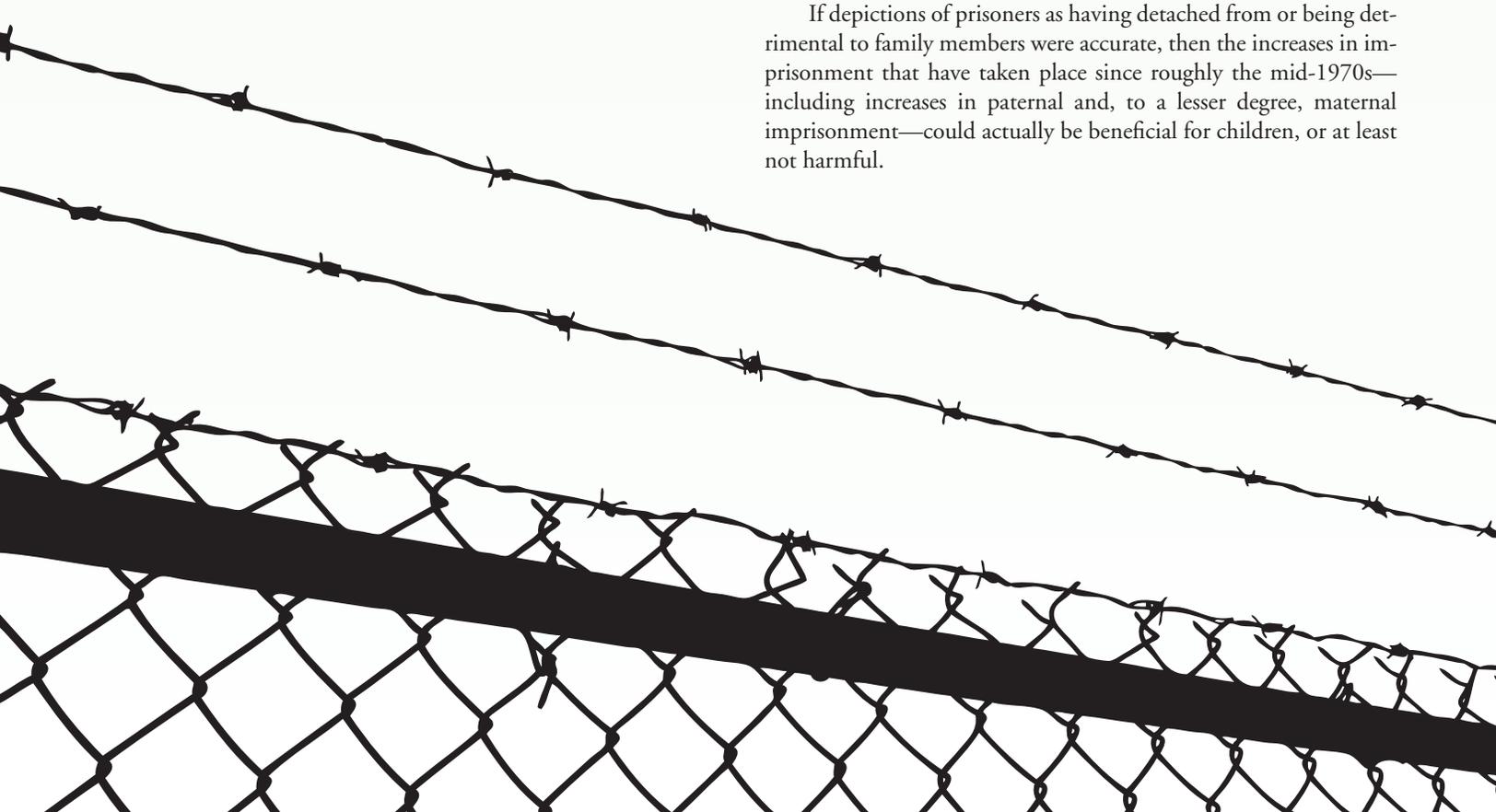
# HOW MASS IMPRISONMENT *HAS—AND HAS NOT—* SHAPED CHILDHOOD INEQUALITY

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Dramatic increases in paternal imprisonment have fundamentally altered racial inequality in child well-being.

Media accounts of the people who cycle through prisons and jails tend to paint these men and women as either distant from their families or doing incredible damage to them because of some combination of their chronic joblessness, poor impulse control, mental health problems, or struggles with addiction.

If depictions of prisoners as having detached from or being detrimental to family members were accurate, then the increases in imprisonment that have taken place since roughly the mid-1970s—including increases in paternal and, to a lesser degree, maternal imprisonment—could actually be beneficial for children, or at least not harmful.



However, an overview of research on the prevalence and consequences of paternal and maternal imprisonment shows that mass imprisonment—the tremendous, highly concentrated rates of imprisonment that now characterize American society—may have a greater variety of effects on children and particularly on inequality of black and white children.

### Prevalence

There are two ways to think about the prevalence of parental imprisonment. The first and by far the most commonly used method estimates what share of children have a parent imprisoned on any given day.<sup>1</sup> Another method for considering the prevalence of parental imprisonment asks not what proportion of children will have their mother or father imprisoned on any given day, but what share of them will ever have their mother or father imprisoned.

Although the first method—the daily parental incarceration rate method—shows huge shifts in the proportion of children with a parent incarcerated since the onset of the prison boom, shifts in the cumulative risk of paternal and maternal imprisonment are even more pronounced.<sup>2</sup> According to estimates of the risk of ever having a parent imprisoned between birth and age 14, the percentage of black children experiencing paternal imprisonment at any point increased from just under 14 percent to just over 25 percent from 1978 to 1990.

White children also experienced increases in the risk of paternal imprisonment, but absolute changes were far smaller, increasing from just over 2 percent in 1978 to just under 4 percent in 1990. Thinking beyond just race to also consider class demonstrates just how much mass imprisonment has reshaped the life course of the most marginalized black children, as over half of black children whose fathers dropped out of high school had their father experience prison.

Changes in the risk of maternal imprisonment were more muted and, with just 1 in 200 white children experiencing maternal imprisonment now, those risks barely even merit a mention for white children. The risk of maternal imprisonment was somewhat more pronounced for black children by 1990, with just over 3 percent of these children experiencing it. For children of black mothers who didn't finish high school, the risk was closer to 5 percent.

### Paternal vs. Maternal Incarceration

Although theoretically parental imprisonment could be common and still have minimal effects on individual children or on inequality among children, key studies indicate that the effects are in fact significant, depending to a great extent on whether it is the mother or the father who is incarcerated.

The consequences of paternal imprisonment have received the most attention. Research has yet to provide solid evidence to pin-



point whether it is the increasing material hardship, mental health problems, or the drop-offs in paternal involvement that mothers face when the father of their children is incarcerated that drive the effects of paternal incarceration on children. But the fact remains that the incarceration of a father appears to have negative consequences for children's well-being not only across a host of vital behavioral dimensions, such as increases in children's physically aggressive, externalizing, internalizing, and overall behaviors, but also across a range of outcomes that include homelessness and infant mortality.<sup>3</sup> In some cases, moreover, the effects are quite large. Paternal incarceration increases the physical aggression of young boys by nearly one-third. The consequences of paternal incarceration for children are thus well established at this point.

If the consequences of paternal incarceration have been consistent and negative, the same is not true of maternal incarceration. A series of influential and methodologically rigorous qualitative and quantitative studies link maternal incarceration with significant harm to children.<sup>4</sup> Yet at the same time, other qualitative and quantitative studies link maternal incarceration with no discernible child harm—and note positive consequences for children in some instances.<sup>5</sup> The difficulties these mothers faced even before their incarceration may explain that outcome.

Those difficulties include poverty and material hardship, domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and housing instability. Often their children had lived part of the time away from the mothers even before their incarceration. The one exception to the uncertainty surrounding the consequences of maternal imprisonment for child well-being has to do with foster care. Although individual-level tests of this relationship are sparse, macro-level research using states as the unit of analysis shows that increases in maternal imprisonment explain about 30 percent of the doubling of foster-care caseloads in the United States between 1985 and 2000.<sup>6</sup>

### Effects on Childhood Inequality

Meanwhile, what should we make of the consequences of mass imprisonment for inequality among children? On the one hand, we have the cumulative risks of paternal imprisonment among black children in the 25 percent range and substantial, well-documented negative effects. Those results suggest that mass paternal imprisonment has substantially increased racial inequality in child well-being. Indeed, as Sara Wakefield and I suggest in *Children of the Prison Boom*, the effects of mass paternal imprisonment on inequality among children are so large that they trump even the consequences of mass imprisonment for inequality among adult men.

On the other hand, the consequences of mass maternal imprisonment are less clear-cut for two reasons. In the first place, thinking of maternal imprisonment as anything happening *en masse* is difficult because even for the most marginalized children—black children whose mothers did not complete high school—the risk of ever having a mother imprisoned is still 1 in 20. Second, for increases in maternal imprisonment to have effects on inequality, it must not only be increasingly racially disparate, but also exert negative effects on children.

There is, to be sure, some evidence that maternal imprisonment harms children. Yet at this point, the evidence in favor of null or positive effects of maternal imprisonment trumps the evidence in favor of harmful effects, suggesting that the prison boom—and the attendant increases in the share of children whose mother is imprisoned at some point—changed childhood inequality little.

Convincing though the research in this area is, we still lack studies that make the causal case airtight. If the next wave of research strengthens the finding that the effects are causal, we must consider mass imprisonment alongside other major American institutions of social stratification.

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### Endnotes

- 1 See Christopher J. Mumola, "Incarcerated Parents and Their Children" (Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report, Washington, DC, 2000).
- 2 Christopher Wildeman, "Parental Imprisonment, the Prison Boom, and the Concentration of Childhood Disadvantage," *Demography* 46 (2009): 271, 273.
- 3 See Ofira Schwartz-Soicher, Amanda Geller, and Irwin Garfinkel, "The Effect of Paternal Incarceration on Material Hardship," *Social Service Review* 85 (2011): 447–473; Christopher Wildeman, Jason Schnittker, and Kristin Turney, "Despair by Association? The Mental Health of Mothers with Children by Recently Incarcerated Fathers," *American Sociological Review* (2012); Amanda Geller, "Paternal Incarceration and Father-Child Contact in Fragile Families," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, forthcoming; Kristin Turney and Christopher Wildeman, "Explaining the Countervailing Consequences of Paternal Incarceration for Parenting," *American Sociological Review*, forthcoming; Amanda Geller et al., "Beyond Absenteeism: Father Incarceration and Child Development," *Demography* 49 (2012): 49–76; Christopher Wildeman "Paternal Incarceration and Children's Physically Aggressive Behaviors: Evidence from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study," *Social Forces* 89 (2010): 285–309; and Sara Wakefield and Christopher Wildeman, *Children of the Prison Boom: Mass Incarceration and the Future of American Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).
- 4 See Joyce A. Arditti, *Parental Incarceration and the Family: Psychological and Social Effects of Imprisonment on Children, Parents, and Caregivers* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); and John Hagan and Holly Foster, "Children of the American Prison Generation: Student and School Spillover Effects of Incarcerating Mothers," *Law and Society Review* 46 (2012): 37–69.
- 5 See Peggy Giordano, *Legacies of Crime: A Follow-Up of the Children of Highly Delinquent Girls and Boys* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010): 147–150; Rosa Minhyo Cho, "The Impact of Maternal Imprisonment on Children's Educational Achievement: Results from Children in Chicago Public Schools," *Journal of Human Resources* 44 (2009): 772–797; Christopher Wildeman and Kristin Turney, "Positive, Negative, or Null? The Effects of Maternal Incarceration on Children's Behavioral Problems" (Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Working Paper WP12-22-FF, 2012).
- 6 Christopher A. Swann and Michelle Sheran Sylvester, "The Foster Care Crisis: What Caused Caseloads to Grow?" *Demography* 43 (2006): 309–335.