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# The Black Family and Mass Incarceration

By  
BRUCE WESTERN  
and  
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Released in 1965, the Moynihan Report traced the severe social and economic distress of poor urban African Americans to high rates of single-parenthood. Against Moynihan's calls for social investment in poor inner-city communities, politics moved in a punitive direction, driving massive growth in the prison population. The authors document the emergence of mass incarceration and describe its significance for African American family life. The era of mass incarceration can be understood as a new stage in the history of American racial inequality. Because of its recent arrival, the social impact of mass incarceration remains poorly understood. The authors conclude by posing several key research questions that can illuminate the effects of dramatic growth in the American penal system.

*Keywords:* mass incarceration; family; inequality; Daniel Patrick Moynihan

Today, we read Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 report, *The Negro Family: The Case For National Action*, with a sense of lost opportunity. The report drew attention to the problems of chronic idleness, addiction, and serious violence in minority urban neighborhoods of concentrated poverty. Moynihan traced these problems to the breakdown of the African American family. High

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nonmarital birth rates, divorce and separation, and single-parenthood, in Moynihan's analysis, all contributed to ghetto poverty, crime, and other dislocations. Although Moynihan did not offer a detailed policy solution, he understood that the social problems of the urban poor stood in the way of the historic promise of full African American citizenship demanded by the civil rights movements.

Sounding the alarm over ghetto poverty in 1965, Moynihan named a social problem and suggested a direction for its solution. Viewed in hindsight, the report marked a fork in the road. Many of the social problems Moynihan identified have subsequently worsened. Joblessness among young, black, noncollege men climbed through the 1960s and 1970s. Crime rates and rates of single-parenthood also escalated. While Moynihan called for increased social investment to avert the problems of crime and poverty, public policy turned instead in a punitive direction, massively expanding the role of the criminal justice system. By the early 2000s, more than a third of young black noncollege men were incarcerated. Among black men younger than forty, there were nearly twice as many prison records as bachelor's degrees. The spectacular growth of the American penal system has transformed the institutional context of urban poverty in a way that was wholly unexpected by Moynihan or other students of social policy of his time.

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*Although family breakdown was not the immediate cause of the American prison boom, mass incarceration has had potentially profound effects on the family life of those caught in the web of the criminal justice system.*

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In this article, we describe the main contours of the American prison boom and its effect on the lives and structure of poor African American families. We argue that in the wake of the Moynihan Report, economic conditions among the ghetto poor continued to deteriorate. Instead of a movement for social investment in the urban poor that Moynihan supported, politics turned to the right. Political currents flowed to law and order and away from rehabilitative criminal justice policy. Retribution and incapacitation were embraced as the main objectives of criminal punishment. As a result, the prison population ballooned through the 1980s and 1990s, producing astonishing incarceration rates among young African American men. Although family breakdown was not the immediate cause of the American prison boom, mass incarceration has had potentially profound effects on the family life of those caught in the web of the criminal justice system. Research is still in its infancy, but we conclude by describing what we see as the most important questions linking mass incarceration to the family life of America's urban poor.

## Political and Economic Roots of the Prison Boom

Mass imprisonment of the late 1990s can be traced to two basic shifts in politics and economics. The growth of harsh sentencing policies and a punitive approach to drug control began with a rightward shift in American politics, first visible at the national level in the mid-1960s. Barry Goldwater's ill-fated presidential run in 1964 was pivotal (Beckett 1997; Gest 2001). Goldwater, in accepting the Republican nomination, warned that crime and disorder were threats to human freedom, and freedom must be "balanced so that liberty lacking order will not become the license of the mob and of the jungle." The Republican campaign of 1964 linked the problem of street crime to civil rights protest and the growing unease among whites about racial violence.

Although Goldwater was roundly defeated by Lyndon B. Johnson, conservatives within the Republican Party had brought to the national stage a new kind of politics. Historically, responsibilities for crime control were divided mostly between state and local agencies. The Republicans had placed the issue of crime squarely on the national agenda. What is more, by treating civil rights protest as a strain of social disorder, veiled connections were drawn between the crime problem, on one hand, and black social protest, on the other.

The social problem of crime became a reality as rates of murder and other violent crimes escalated in the decade following the 1964 election. Throughout the 1960s, urban riots in Los Angeles, New York, Newark, Detroit, and dozens of other cities provided a socially ambiguous mixture of disorder and politics. Despite Goldwater's defeat, support grew for the new law and order message, particularly among southern whites and northern working-class voters of Irish, Italian, and German descent who turned away from the Democratic Party in the 1970s (Edsall and Edsall 1991).

Elevated crime rates and the realigned race relations of the post-civil rights period provided a receptive context for the law and order themes of the Republican Party. In state politics, Republican governors and legislators increased their representation through the South and West and placed themselves in the vanguard of the movements for mandatory minimum sentences, sentence enhancements for repeat offenders, and expanded prison capacity (Western 2006; Davey 1998; Jacobs and Carmichael 2001). Quantitative analyses show that incarceration rates grew fastest under Republican governors and state legislators (Western 2006, chap. 3).

Although Republicans were quick to promote prison expansion and tough new criminal sentences, Democrats also came to support punitive criminal justice policy. Perhaps the clearest signal that Democrats too were tough on crime was sent by President Clinton's Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (1994). The Clinton crime bill earmarked \$9.9 billion for prison construction and added life terms for third-time federal felons (Windelsham 1998, 104-7). By the 1990s, Democrats and Republicans had come to support the sentencing policies and capital construction campaigns that grew the penal population.

Shifts in politics and policy, however, are only half the story. The newly punitive system of criminal sentencing would have had largely symbolic significance but for the ready supply of chronically idle young men that came to swell the nation's prisons and jails. Urban deindustrialization eroded the labor market for unskilled young men while punitive politics gained momentum in the 1970s and 1980s. Wilson's (1987) study of *The Truly Disadvantaged* provides the classic analysis. The decline of manufacturing industry employment in the Midwest and the Northeast coupled with the exodus of middle class and working-class blacks from inner cities produced pockets of severe unemployment in poor urban neighborhoods.

From 1969 to 1979, central cities recorded enormous declines in manufacturing and blue collar employment. New York, for example, lost 170,000 blue-collar jobs through the 1970s, another 120,000 jobs were shed in Chicago, and blue-collar employment in Detroit fell by 90,000 jobs (Kasarda 1989, 29). For young black men in metropolitan areas, employment rates fell by 30 percent among high school dropouts and nearly 20 percent among high school graduates. Job loss was only a third as large among young noncollege whites (Bound and Holzer 1993, 390).

Variation in imprisonment is closely linked to variation in wages and employment. Weekly earnings for young low-education men declined through the 1980s and 1990s while imprisonment rates were rising. Among black men, unemployment increased steeply with declining education. One study estimates that if wages and employment had not declined among low-education men since the early 1980s, growth in prison admission rates would have been reduced by as much as 25 percent by 2001 (Western, Kleykamp, and Rosenfeld 2004).

The urban deindustrialization that produced the raw material for the prison boom was as much a failure of institutions as a failure of markets. Large job losses in the mid-1970s and early 1980s were concentrated in unionized industries (Farber and Western 2001). De-unionization thus joined manufacturing decline to drive down the incomes of unskilled inner city workers. Besides unemployment insurance, which provided only temporary assistance, few social programs were available to supplement the incomes or retrain or mobilize young able-bodied men into new jobs. The welfare system was also poorly equipped to handle the social problems linked to male unemployment. Drug addiction, petty offending, and public idleness all afflicted the neighborhoods of concentrated disadvantage.

Idle young men in poor minority neighborhoods supplied a large share of the inmates that drove the prison boom. The path from concentrated economic disadvantage to mass imprisonment runs partly through the mechanism of crime, but policy also played a vital role. At any given point in time, crime among young disadvantaged men is higher than in the rest of the population. For example, the murder rates—victimization and offending—are about twenty-five times higher for black men aged eighteen to twenty-four than for white men aged twenty-five and older (Pastore and Maguire 2006). Violent crime is also a more serious problem in poor communities than affluent ones (e.g., Sampson 1987; see also the review of Braithwaite 1979). The criminal involvement of young, economically disadvantaged men makes them more likely at a given point in time to go to prison than others who are less involved in crime.

Crime cannot explain, however, why disadvantaged young men were so much more likely to go to prison by the end of the 1990s than two decades earlier. Indeed, survey data show that poor male youth were much less involved in crime at the height of the prison boom, in 2000, than at its inception, in 1980. To explain the growing risk of imprisonment over time, the role of policy is decisive. Because the system of criminal sentencing had come to rely so heavily on incarceration, an arrest in the late 1990s was far more likely to lead to prison time than at the beginning of the prison boom in 1980 (Blumstein and Beck 1999).

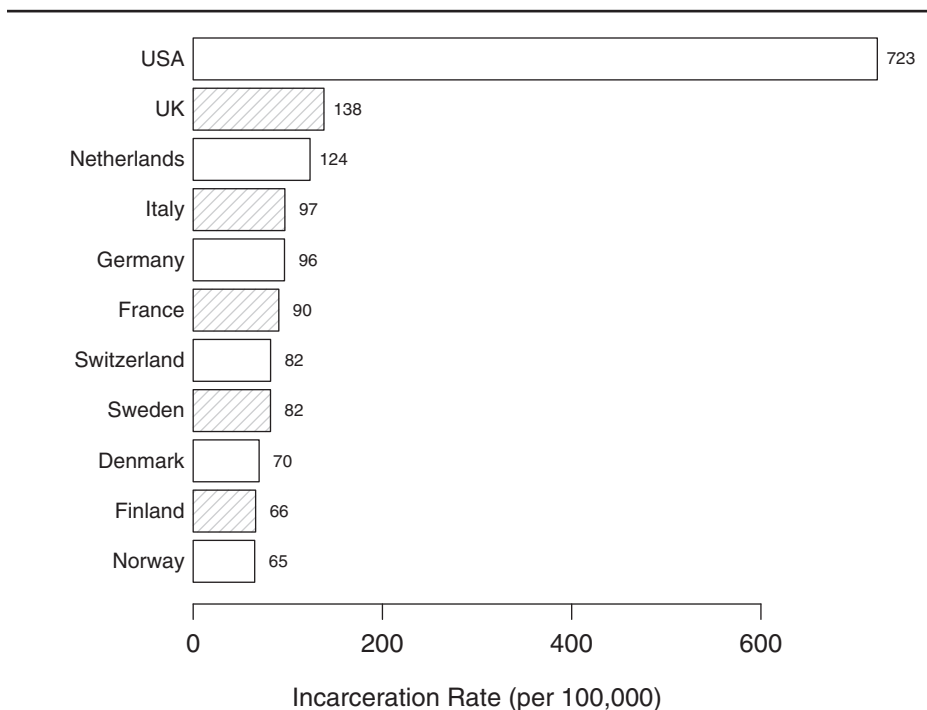
The drug trade holds a special place in this story. The drug trade itself became a source of economic opportunity in the jobless ghetto. Ethnographers paint striking pictures of how the inner-city drug trade becomes a focal point for the problems of economic disadvantage, violence, and state control. Sudhir Venkatesh and Steven Levitt (2000) describe how drug trafficking thrived in the vacuum of legitimate employment in Chicago's South Side neighborhoods. Chicago youth spoke to Venkatesh and Levitt of their "gang affiliation and their drive to earn income in ways that resonated with representations of work in the mainstream corporate firm. Many approached [gang] involvement as an institutionalized path of socioeconomic mobility for down-and-out youth" (p. 447). In Elijah Anderson's (1999) account, violence follows the drug trade as crime becomes a voracious force in the poor neighborhoods of Philadelphia:

Surrounded by violence and by indifference to the innocent victims of drug dealers and users alike, the decent people are finding it harder and harder to maintain a sense of community. Thus violence comes to regulate life in the drug-infested neighborhoods and the putative neighborhood leaders are increasingly the people who control the violence. (P. 134)

The picture drawn by the ethnographic research is of poor neighborhoods, chronically short of legitimate work and embedded in a violent and illegal market for drugs. High rates of joblessness and crime, and a flourishing street trade in illegal drugs, combined with harsher criminal penalties and intensified urban policing to produce high incarceration rates among young unskilled men in inner cities. In the twenty-five years from 1980, the incarceration rate tripled among white men in their twenties, but fewer than 2 percent were behind bars by 2004. Imprisonment rates for young black men increased less quickly, but one in seven were in custody by 2004. Incarceration rates are much higher among male high school dropouts in their twenties. Threefold growth in the imprisonment of young white male dropouts left 7 percent in prison or jail by 2004. The incarceration rate for young low-education black men rose by 22 points in the two decades after 1980. Incredibly, 34 percent of all young black male high school dropouts were in prison or jail on an average day in 2004, an incarceration rate forty times higher than the national average (Western 2006, chap. 1).

Tough sentences for drug and repeat offenders, strict policing and prosecution of drug traffic and public order offending, and unforgiving parole supervision broadened the use of imprisonment from its traditional focus on serious crime. Certainly

FIGURE 1  
 INCARCERATION RATES PER ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND RESIDENTS,  
 UNITED STATES AND WESTERN EUROPE, 2004



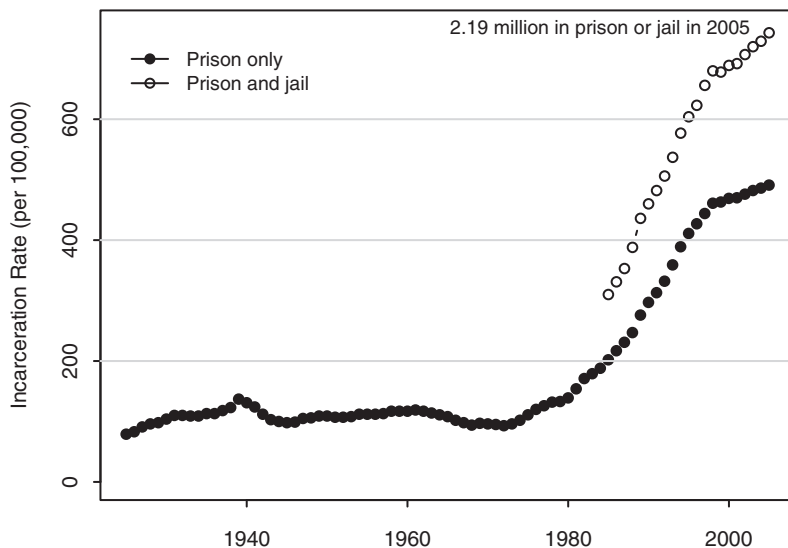
SOURCE: Aebi (2005); Harrison and Beck (2006).

sentences increased for serious crime, and this contributed to incarceration rates too. For example, time served for murderers increased from five to eleven years, from 1980 to 1996 (Blumstein and Beck 1999, 36). But growth in the share of less serious offenders in state prison increased much more rapidly (Blumstein and Beck 1999, 24, 37). Growth in the numbers of drug offenders, parole violators, and public order offenders reflects the use of penal policy as a surrogate social policy, in which a troublesome and unruly population is increasingly managed with incarceration.

## Mass Incarceration

The scale of the penal system is usually measured by an incarceration rate. The incarceration rate records the number of people in prison or jail on a given day per 100,000 of the population. Figure 1 compares the United States's incarceration rate in 2004 to the incarceration rates of the long-standing democracies of

FIGURE 2  
 U.S. STATE AND FEDERAL IMPRISONMENT RATES, 1925-2005;  
 U.S. PRISON AND JAIL INCARCERATION RATES, 1983-2005



SOURCE: Maguire and Pastore (2007).

Western Europe. The penal systems of Western Europe locked up, on average, about 100 per 100,000. The United States by contrast incarcerated more than seven times the European average, with an incarceration rate of more than 700 per 100,000.

The contemporary scale of criminal punishment is also historically unusual. Although we do not have long time series of the total penal population of prison and jail inmates, data on the state and federal prison populations extend back to 1925. The time series in Figure 2 shows that between 1925 and 1973, the fraction of the U.S. population in state and federal prison varied in a narrow range of around 100 per 100,000—close to the total incarceration rates in Western Europe. Beginning in 1974, the prison population began to grow, and the incarceration rate increased continuously for the next three decades. By 2005, nearly 2.2 million people were in custody, either in prison for felony convictions or in local jails awaiting trial or serving short sentences. These figures do not fully reflect the contemporary correctional population. In 2005, another 784,000 men and women were under community supervision on parole, while 4.1 million people were on probation. The total population under correctional supervision thus includes more than 7 million people, or about 3.1 percent of all U.S. adults (Glaze and Bonczar 2006).



The broad significance of the penal system for American social inequality results from extreme social and economic disparities in incarceration. More than 90 percent of all prison and jail inmates are men. Women's incarceration rates have increased more quickly than men's since 1980, but much higher rates persist for men, leaving women to contend with raising children while their partners cycle in and out of jail. These men are young, of working age, many with small children. About two-thirds of state prisoners are over eighteen years old but under age thirty-five. With this age pattern, only a small number of people are incarcerated at any point in time, but many more pass through the penal system at some point in their lives.

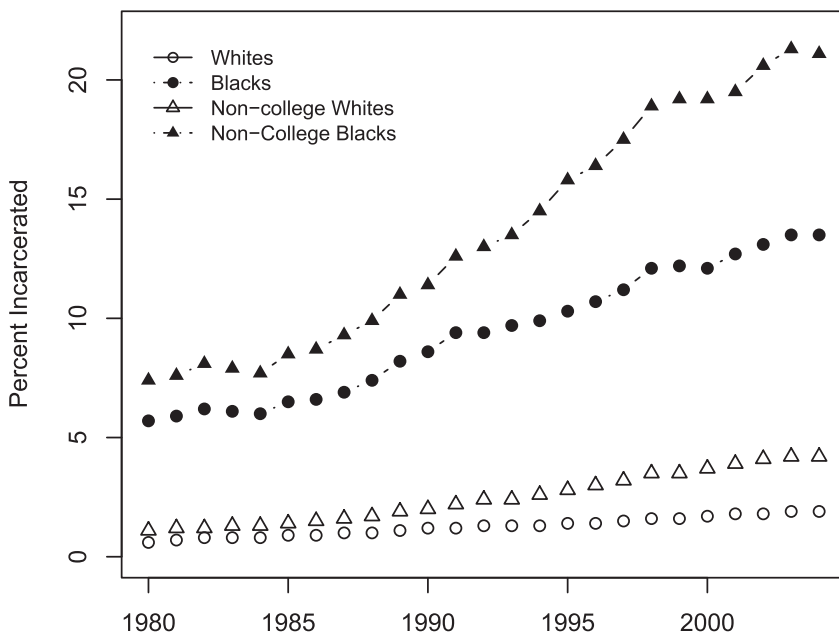
Incarceration is also concentrated among the disadvantaged. High incarceration rates among low-status and minority men are unmistakable. The 1997 survey of state and federal prisoners shows that state inmates average less than eleven years of schooling. A third were not working at the time of their incarceration, and the average wage of the remainder is much lower than that of other men with the same level of education. African Americans and Hispanics also have higher incarceration rates than whites, and together the two groups account for about two-thirds of the state prison population.

The black-white difference in incarceration rates is especially striking. Black men are eight times more likely to be incarcerated than whites, and large racial disparities can be seen for all age groups and at different levels of education. The large black-white disparity in incarceration is unmatched by most other social indicators. Racial disparities in unemployment (two to one), nonmarital child-bearing (three to one), infant mortality (two to one), and wealth (one to five) are all significantly lower than the eight to one black-white ratio in incarceration rates (see Western 2006). If white men were incarcerated at the same rate as blacks, there would be more than 6 million people in prison and jail, and more than 5 percent of the male working-age population would be incarcerated.

Age, race, and educational disparities concentrate imprisonment among the disadvantaged. Figure 3 shows trends in incarceration rates for young black and white men with different levels of schooling. From 1980 to 2004, the percentage of young white men in prison or jail increased from 0.6 to 1.9 percent. Among young white men with only a high school education, incarceration rates were about twice as high. At the dawn of the prison boom, in 1980, the incarceration rate for young black men, 5.7 percent, was more than twice as high as that for low-education whites. By 2004, 13.5 percent of black men in their twenties were in prison or jail. Incarceration rates were higher in the lower half of the education distribution. More than one in five young noncollege black men were behind bars on a typical day in 2004.

Incarceration rates offer a snapshot of the extent of penal confinement. Time series of incarceration rates tell us how the extent of penal confinement has shifted historically. We can also study, not the level of incarceration at a point in time, but how the risk of incarceration accumulates over an individual's life. This kind of life course analysis asks what is the likelihood an individual will go to prison by age twenty-five, thirty, or thirty-five. Instead of providing a snapshot of the risk of incarceration, this analysis describes a typical biography.

FIGURE 3  
THE PERCENTAGE OF MEN, AGED TWENTY-TWO TO THIRTY,  
IN PRISON OR JAIL BY RACE AND EDUCATION



SOURCE: Authors' tabulations, following Western (2006, 17).

The life course perspective provides a compelling account of social integration. In this account, the passage to adulthood is a sequence of well-ordered stages that affect life trajectories long after the early transitions are completed. In modern times, arriving at adult status involves moving from school to work, then to marriage, to establishing a home and becoming a parent. Completing this sequence without delay promotes stable employment, marriage, and other positive life outcomes. The process of becoming an adult thus influences success in fulfilling adult roles and responsibilities.

As an account of social integration, life course analysis has attracted the interest of students of crime and deviance. Criminologists point to the normalizing effects of life course transitions. Steady jobs and good marriages build social bonds that keep would-be offenders in a daily routine. They enmesh men who are tempted by crime in a web of supportive social relationships. Strong family bonds and steady work restrict men's opportunities for antisocial behavior and offer them a stake in normal life. For persistent lawbreakers, the adult roles of spouse and worker offer a pathway out of crime (Sampson and Laub 1993; Warr 1998; Hagan 1993). Those who fail to secure the markers of adulthood are more likely to persist in criminal

behavior. This idea of a normalizing, integrative life path offers a powerful alternative to claims that criminality is a stable trait possessed by some but absent in others. Above all else, the life course account of crime is dynamic, describing how people change as their social context evolves with age.

Imprisonment significantly alters the life course. Working life is disrupted as workers with prison records try to find jobs from employers who are deeply suspicious of applicants with criminal records. The stigma of a prison record also creates legal barriers to skilled and licensed occupations, rights to welfare benefits, and voting rights (Holzer 1996; Pager 2003; Uggen and Manza 2002). Ex-prisoners are also less likely to get married or cohabit with the mothers of their children (Lopoo and Western 2005). By eroding opportunities for employment and marriage, incarceration may also lead ex-inmates back to a life of crime. The volatility of adolescence may last well into midlife for men serving prison time. In short, imprisonment is a turning point in which young crime-involved men acquire a new status involving diminished life chances.

To place the risks of imprisonment in the context of the life course, we report new estimates of the cumulative risks of imprisonment by age thirty to thirty-four, for five-year birth cohorts born through the postwar period (see Table 1). Because most inmates enter prison for the first time before age thirty-five, these cumulative risks of imprisonment roughly describe lifetime risks of imprisonment. We emphasize that these lifetime risks of incarceration are for imprisonment, as opposed to jail incarceration. Imprisonment here describes a sentence of twelve months or longer for a felony conviction, now about twenty-eight months of time served, at the median.

The oldest cohort was born just after World War II, and its members reached their midthirties in 1979, just at the takeoff of the prison boom. In this group, just over 1 percent of whites and 9 percent of blacks would go to prison. As incarceration rates climbed through the 1980s, lifetime imprisonment risks also increased. The big jump in imprisonment separates men born in the 1950s and earlier from those born in the 1960s and later. The pervasive presence of the criminal justice system in the lives of African American men only emerges among those born since the mid-1960s who were reaching their midthirties from the end of the 1990s. Like the long time series of incarceration rates, these figures on postwar birth cohorts underscore the historic novelty of mass incarceration. Only through the 1990s did the penal system figure prominently in the lives of young black men.

Like incarceration rates, lifetime risks of imprisonment are also steeply stratified by education. We report cumulative risks of imprisonment for men who have had at least some college education and for all those with just a high school education. Among those with just a high school education, we separate high school dropouts and high school graduates. We report figures for all noncollege men because—particularly for African Americans—those without college education have remained an approximately constant proportion of the population. Educational attainment has increased across birth cohorts chiefly because the proportion of high school dropouts has declined.

TABLE 1  
 CUMULATIVE RISK OF IMPRISONMENT BY AGE THIRTY TO THIRTY-FOUR BY  
 RACE AND EDUCATION FOR MEN BORN 1945 THROUGH 1949 TO 1975  
 THROUGH 1979 (IN PERCENTAGES)

	1945-1949	1950-1954	1955-1959	1960-1964	1965-1969	1970-1974	1975-1979
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 noncollege	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 noncollege	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: Data sources and methods are described in Pettit and Western (2004).

NOTE: Estimates for the cohorts born after 1969 are based on data from the 2004 Survey on Inmates of States and Federal Correctional Facilities.

Lifetime risks of imprisonment among black men with little schooling are particularly striking. For noncollege African American men, about 12 percent of those born just after the war would ultimately go to prison. For those born thirty years later, reaching their thirties in 2005, at least 36 percent would serve prison time. The latter figure is actually a slight underestimate, because those born 1975 to 1979 have not been exposed to the risk of imprisonment for as long as the older cohorts.

At the very bottom of the education distribution, among high school dropouts, prison time has become extraordinarily prevalent. For black male dropouts born since the mid-1960s, 60 to 70 percent go to prison. For this very poorly schooled segment of the population, serving time in prison has become a routine life event on the pathway through adulthood. Indeed, we need only go back several decades to find a time when incarceration was not pervasive in the lives of young black men with little schooling.

Detailed figures on the racial and educational differences in imprisonment also show another pattern. While lifetime risks of imprisonment grew threefold for men without a college education, imprisonment among the college-educated less than doubled. In short, most of the growth in imprisonment was concentrated among those with little schooling. At the same time, racial disparities in imprisonment risks, while large, did not increase significantly. The figures thus indicate that in the period of the prison boom, class inequality in incarceration clearly increased, but racial inequality did not. Because racial disparities in imprisonment were so large to begin with, however, the prison boom produced extraordinarily high rates of incarceration among young noncollege black men.

From a life course perspective, we can compare imprisonment to other significant life events that are commonly thought to mark the path through young adulthood. Life course researchers have previously studied college graduation, military service, and marriage as key milestones that move young men forward in life to establishing a household and a steady job. Comparing imprisonment to these life events suggests how the pathway through adulthood has been changed by the prison boom.

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*[M]ost of the growth in imprisonment was concentrated among those with little schooling.*

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The risks of each life event are different for blacks and whites, but racial differences in imprisonment greatly overshadow any other inequality. By their early thirties, whites are more than twice as likely to hold a bachelor's degree compared with blacks, whereas blacks are about 50 percent more likely to have served in the military. However, black men in their early thirties are about seven times more likely than whites to have a prison record. Indeed, recent birth cohorts of black men are more likely to have prison records (22.4 percent) than military records (17.4 percent) or bachelor's degrees (12.5 percent). The share of the population with prison records is particularly striking among noncollege men. Whereas few noncollege white men have prison records, nearly a third of black men with less than a college education have been to prison. Noncollege black men in their early thirties in 1999 were more than twice as likely to be ex-felons as veterans (see Table 2).

By 1999, imprisonment had become a common life event for black men that sharply distinguished their pathway through adulthood from that of white men. David Garland coined the term "mass imprisonment" to refer to the high rate of incarceration in the contemporary United States. In Garland's definition, mass imprisonment has two characteristics. First, he writes, "mass imprisonment implies a rate of imprisonment . . . that is markedly above the historical and comparative norm for societies of this type" (Garland 2001, 1). Indeed, we have seen that the rate of incarceration in the United States by the late 1990s was far higher than in Western Europe and without precedent in U.S. history. Second, Garland argues, the demographic concentration of imprisonment produces not the incarceration of individual offenders, but the "systematic imprisonment of whole groups of the population" (Garland 2001, 2).

The empirical markers of mass imprisonment are more slippery in this case. When will the incarceration rate be high enough to imprison, not the individual, but the group? The picture painted by the statistics in this article helps us answer

TABLE 2  
 PERCENTAGE OF NON-HISPANIC BLACK AND WHITE MEN,  
 BORN 1965 TO 1969, EXPERIENCING LIFE EVENTS BY 1999

Life Event	Whites	Blacks
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).

NOTE: The incidence of all live events except prison incarceration were calculated from the 2000 Census. To make the incarceration risks comparable to census statistics, the estimates are adjusted to describe the percentage of men, born 1965 to 1969, who have ever been imprisoned and survived to 1999.

this question. Not only did incarceration become common among young black men at the end of the 1990s, but its prevalence also exceeded that of other life events that we usually associate with passage through the life course. More than college graduation or military service, incarceration has come to typify the biographies of African American men born since the late 1960s.

## Mass Incarceration and Family Life

As imprisonment became common for low-education black men by the end of the 1990s, the penal system also became familiar to poor minority families. By 1999, 30 percent of noncollege black men in their midthirties had been to prison, and through incarceration, many were separated from their wives, girlfriends, and children. Women and children in low-income urban communities now routinely cope with absent husbands and fathers lost to incarceration and adjust to their return after release. Poor single men detached from family life are also affected, bearing the stigma of a prison record in the marriage markets of disadvantaged urban neighborhoods.

Discussions of the family life of criminal offenders typically focus on the crime-suppressing effects of marriage, not the effects of incarceration on family life. Researchers find that marriage offers a pathway out of crime for men with histories of delinquency. Not a wedding itself, but marriage in the context of a warm, stable, and constructive relationship, offers the antidote to crime (Sampson and Laub 1993; Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998). Wives and family members in

such relationships provide the web of obligations and responsibilities that restrains young men and reduces their contact with the male friends whose recreations veer into antisocial behavior (Warr 1998).

The prison boom places the link between crime and marriage in a new light. If a good marriage is important for criminal desistance, what is the effect of incarceration on marriage? The connections between incarceration, marriage, and the family are also implicated in the larger story of rising urban inequality. In the past three decades, American family life was transformed by declining marriage rates and growth in the number of single-parent households. Marriage rates fell among women from all class backgrounds. Between 1970 and 2000, the share of white women aged twenty-five to thirty-four who were married declined from more than 80 percent to just over 60 percent. Marriage rates for African American women halved from 60 to around 30 percent. The decline in marriage propelled growth in the number of single-parent households, although this effect was confined to those with little education (Ellwood and Jencks 2004). The share of college-educated women who were single mothers remained constant at around 5 percent between 1970 and 2000, while the fraction of single mothers among low-education white women increased from 8 to 18 percent. Trends were most dramatic among black women. In 1970, about one-third of low-education black women were single parents, but the number increased to more than 50 percent in the next thirty years. By 2000, stable two-parent households became relatively rare, especially among African Americans with little schooling (Western 2006, chap. 1).

Poverty researchers closely followed the changing shape of American families. Growing numbers of female-headed families increased the risks of enduring poverty for women and children. Growing up poor also raised a child's risk of school failure, poor health, and delinquency. Writing in the mid-1980s, William Julius Wilson (1987) traced the growth in the number of female-headed black families to the shrinking number of "marriageable men" in poor urban areas. The shortage of suitable husbands in ghetto neighborhoods was driven by two processes. High rates of male incarceration and mortality tilted the gender ratio, which made it harder for poor urban women to find partners. These effects were small, however, compared to the high rate of joblessness that left few black men in inner cities able to support a family. Many studies later examined the impact of men's employment on marriage rates and found that the unemployed are less likely to be married and that joblessness can increase chances of divorce or separation (e.g., Lichter, LeClere, and McLaughlin 1991; McLanahan and Casper 1995; Blau, Kahn, and Waldfogel 2000). Studies of the effects of employment dominated research on marriage among the disadvantaged, and the idea that incarceration destabilized family life was undeveloped.

To study the family ties of prisoners, we begin by simply describing the levels of marriage and fatherhood in the penal population. Figure 3 compares rates of marriage and fatherhood in the penal population to those for men who are not incarcerated. Levels of marriage are measured for noninstitutional men and male prison and jail inmates, aged twenty-two to thirty, in 2000. Rates of fatherhood



are the percentage of noninstitutional men and male state prisoners, aged thirty-three to forty, who had children by 1997 to 1998.

Marriage rates among prison and jail inmates are very low compared to those on the outside. White male inmates in their twenties are less than half as likely to be married as young white noninstitutional men of the same age. The incarceration gap in marriage is also large for black and Hispanic men. The general level of marriage is highest for Hispanics, but in this case, inmates are only half as likely to be married as their counterparts in the noninstitutional population. Although marriage rates are lowest for black men, only 11 percent of young black inmates are married, compared to a marriage rate of 25 percent among young black men outside of prison and jail. In short, marriage rates among male prisoners in their twenties are only around half as high as in the free population.

Although marriage is uncommon among prisoners, they are just as likely as other men to have children. Figure 3 shows the percentage of men who have ever had children by their late thirties. The prevalence of fatherhood among prisoners is almost identical to that on the outside. For example, 73 percent of noninstitutional black men have had children by their late thirties, compared to 70 percent of black male prisoners of the same age. Male fertility rates among prisoners and nonprisoners are also very similar for whites and Hispanics.

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*Just as incarceration has become a normal life event for disadvantaged young black men, parental incarceration has become commonplace for their children.*

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The combination of high incarceration rates with a large proportion of fathers among inmates means many children now have incarcerated fathers. Data from surveys of prison and jail inmates can be used to calculate the numbers of children with fathers in prison or jail. A time series for 1980 to 2000 shows that the total number of children with incarcerated fathers increased sixfold from about 350,000 to 2.1 million, nearly 3 percent of all children nationwide in 2000. Among whites, the fraction of children with a father in prison or jail is relatively small—about 1.2 percent in 2000. The figure is about three times higher (3.5 percent) for Hispanics. Among African Americans, more than a million, or one in eleven, black children had a father in prison or jail in 2000. The numbers are higher for younger children: by 2000, 10.4 percent of black children under age ten had a father in prison or jail. Just as incarceration has become a normal life event for disadvantaged young black men, parental incarceration has become commonplace for their children.



To better gauge the impact of mass incarceration on children, we report the cumulative risks that one of their parents will be sent to prison. We also report these risks of parental incarceration for black and white children of parents at different levels of education. Just as lifetime risks of imprisonment help describe the life course of adults, cumulative risks of parental imprisonment tell us about the early life course of children.

These figures include incarceration among mothers as well as fathers. The rapid growth in incarceration among women is reflected in these figures. Although incarceration rates among mothers are much lower than those for fathers, the effects of maternal imprisonment on parental separation from children are relatively large. Whereas just under half of fathers were living with their children at the time they were sent to prison, nearly two-thirds of mothers sent to prison were living with their children (Mumola 2000, 3).

Table 3 reports the risks of parental imprisonment by age fourteen for children born in 1978 and 1990 (see Wildeman forthcoming). Among white children born in 1978 who reached their teenage years in the early 1990s, around 2 percent experienced a parent being sent to prison. Among African American children born in the same year, around 14 percent had a parent sent to prison by age fifteen. Twelve years later, among children born in 1990, about a quarter of all black children had a parent sent to prison. Indeed, the proportion of black children who had a mother sent to prison (a relatively rare event) nearly equaled the proportion of white children who had a father sent to prison.

The children of low-education parents were far more exposed to the criminal justice system than the population in general. These estimates indicate that among children born in the late 1970s to noncollege African American parents, about one in seven had a parent sent to prison by the time they reached their teenage years. Just over a decade later, more than a quarter of the children of noncollege black parents experienced parental imprisonment. For black children whose parents dropped out of high school, around half had a parent sent to prison by the early 2000s. Just as imprisonment had become a normal life event for young black male dropouts, so had parental imprisonment become normal for their children.

The prevalence of marriage and fatherhood among prison and jail inmates tells us something about the incapacitation effect of incarceration. Men behind bars cannot fully play the role of father and husband. Single incarcerated men are unlikely to get married while they are locked up. On the outside, the incapacitation effect takes the form of lopsided gender ratios of poor communities. For example, in the high-incarceration neighborhoods of Washington, D.C., there are only sixty-two men for every one hundred women (Braman 2004, 86). Studying U.S. counties, William Sabol and James Lynch (1998) quantify the effects of the removal of men to prison. After accounting for educational attainment, welfare receipt, poverty, employment, and crime, Sabol and Lynch find that the doubling of the number of black men admitted to prison between 1980 and 1990 is associated with a 19 percent increase in the number of families headed by black women.

TABLE 3  
 CUMULATIVE RISKS OF PATERNAL AND MATERNAL IMPRISONMENT  
 FOR CHILDREN BORN IN 1978 AND 1990, BY PARENTS' RACE  
 AND EDUCATION (IN PERCENTAGES)

	Whites		Blacks	
	Maternal	Paternal	Maternal	Paternal
Born 1978				
All	0.2	2.1	1.4	13.4
High school dropout	0.2	4.0	1.9	21.4
High school graduate	0.2	2.0	0.9	9.9
All noncollege	0.2	2.8	1.5	15.1
Some college	0.2	1.4	1.2	7.1
Born 1990				
All	0.6	3.6	3.2	24.5
High school dropout	1.0	7.1	5.0	49.4
High school graduate	0.7	4.7	2.6	20.0
All noncollege	0.8	5.5	3.6	24.5
Some college	0.3	1.7	2.6	13.2

SOURCE: Sources, methods, and figures are reported in Wildeman (forthcoming).

The incapacitation effect captures only part of the impact of the prison boom on marriage. In Wilson's terms, incarceration also damages men's marriageability. Wilson (1987, 83-92) traced declining marriage rates among the ghetto poor to the increasing inability of young disadvantaged black men to support families. Incarceration erodes men's economic desirability even more. Incarceration reduces men's wages, slows the rate of wage growth, increases unemployment, and shortens job tenure. If a poor employment record damages the marriage prospects of single men and contributes to the risk of divorce among those who are married, the economic effects of incarceration will decrease the likelihood of marriage among men who have been to prison and jail.

Wilson (1987) measured marriageability mostly by employment, but a man's criminal record also signals his ability to care and provide for his family. While poor women care about men's economic status, they also worry about men's honesty and respectability. Edin's (2000) ethnographic interviews showed that these noneconomic concerns weighed heavily on low-income women in metropolitan Philadelphia. The women Edin interviewed were deeply distrustful of men. The respondents were often reluctant to marry or develop romantic relationships because they viewed men's marital infidelity as inevitable. Some women's trust in men was shaken by boyfriends who spent household savings on drugs or drink and neglected children in their care.

This wariness was compounded by the men's low social status. For the women in Edin's sample, marriage offered a route to respectability, but "marriage to an

economically unproductive male means . . . permanently taking on his very low status” (Edin 2000, 29). Elijah Anderson (1999, 153) makes a similar point in the opposite way, by describing the dreams of teenage girls in ghetto neighborhoods, a “dream of living happily ever after with one’s children in a nice house in a good neighborhood—essentially the dream of the middle-class American lifestyle.” In these cases, it is the social status of jobless men, their lack of esteem, as much as their material resources, which limits their appeal as husbands.

If reliability and reputation measure the noneconomic aspects of marriageability, incarceration has likely eroded the pool of marriageable men. Just as the stigma of incarceration confers disadvantage in the labor market, it also undermines a man’s prospects in the marriage market. Men in trouble with the authorities cannot offer the respectability that many poor women seek from their partners. A prison record—the official stamp of criminality—can convey trouble to mothers looking for a stable home. For example, Edin’s (2000, 28) interviews described women’s aversion to drug dealing, even when it provided a couple with income: “Mothers fear that if their man gets involved in drug dealing, he might stash weapons, drugs, or drug proceeds in the household, that the violence of street life might follow him into the household.” Because marriage offers a way of enhancing status, the trouble foreshadowed by a prison record may be even more repellent than chronic unemployment.

The stigma of incarceration also strains existing relationships. Erving Goffman (1963, 30) describes stigma’s contagious quality, suffusing personal relationships: “In general the tendency for a stigma to spread from the stigmatized individual to his close connections provides a reason why such relations tend either to be avoided or to be terminated where existing.” Braman’s (2004) fieldwork in Washington, D.C., provides empirical support. The high prevalence of incarceration, he finds, does little to reduce its stigmatic effect. Braman describes the experience of Louisa, whose husband Robert was arrested on an old armed robbery charge after a lengthy period out of prison and in recovery from drug addiction. The couple

had come to think and present themselves as morally upstanding citizens and churchgoers. Because of this, Louisa felt the stigma of her husband’s most recent incarceration all the more intensely. She began to avoid friends and family, not wanting to talk about Robert’s incarceration and lying to them when she did. (P. 170)

Louisa came to withdraw from her extended family and grappled with depression during Robert’s incarceration. Braman argues that the stigma of incarceration is even more severe for family members than the offender, because wives and children live and work outside the prison, exposed to the condemnation of neighbors and other community members.

The separation imposed by incarceration also weighs heavily on relationships. Interviews with ex-offenders suggest that the friendships underlying romantic relationships are diluted by time apart. Often women become more independent and self-sufficient while their partners are incarcerated (Nurse 2002, 109). Just as Edin’s (2000) female respondents distrusted men’s commitment, Ann Nurse

(2002) reports that individuals in her Californian sample of juvenile offenders were constantly suspicious of the fidelity of their wives and girlfriends. Often, these fears were well-founded, and many romantic relationships failed while men were incarcerated (see also Edin, Nelson, and Paranal 2004, 62).

Quantitative analysis of survey data is generally consistent with the field research. Black single men are especially likely to remain unmarried if they have prison records. The gap in marriage rates between black noninmates and ex-inmates is estimated to be anywhere from 20 to 200 percent. Survey data point more strongly to the destabilizing effects of incarceration on couples. Consider an analysis of the Fragile Families Survey of Child Wellbeing—a survey of poor urban couples with infant children. The survey shows that men who are living with the mothers of their newborn children are three times more likely to separate within the year if they have a history of incarceration (Western 2006, chap. 7).

## Unanswered Questions

Moynihan traced the dilapidated state of the black family of the early 1960s to the burdens of slavery and a history of discrimination. In the early 2000s, however, the family life of poor African Americans in urban neighborhoods of concentrated poverty is also strained by mass incarceration. Emerging only in the closing years of the 1990s, mass incarceration has routinely drawn young noncollege black men and their families into the orbit of the penal system.

While a handful of ethnographic studies are beginning to shed light on the effects of incarceration on the family life of the urban poor, and several quantitative studies have examined the effects of incarceration on marriage and divorce, research is still in its infancy. We close our discussion by describing what we see as the central research questions and offering some hypotheses for understanding the family life of the urban poor in the era of mass incarceration.

*How does incarceration affect family violence and other victimization?* In many cases, violent husbands and fathers are removed from households by incarceration. Survey data indicate that men who have been incarcerated are much more likely to have violent relationships with their partners, even if they were incarcerated for nonviolent offenses. From this perspective, mass incarceration may have significantly reduced family violence and other conflict in poor households. On the other hand, removing a father from the household may also open the door to other adult males who also pose a risk to poor women and their children. If children are at greater risk of abuse, for example, when a nonbiological adult male begins living in the household, mass incarceration may contribute to victimization rather than reduce it. What is more, returning prisoners may present more of a risk of family violence as a consequence of their incarceration. Very little is known about the patterns of violence and abuse that follow the removal of a parent from a family by incarceration. In assessing the effects of incarceration on the lives of poor families, this question is perhaps paramount.

*What are the financial consequences of incarceration for poor families?* Research shows that incarceration is associated with reductions in employment and earnings of ex-prisoners after release (Western 2006; see the review of Western, Kling, and Weiman 2001). The annual earnings of ex-prisoners are about 40 percent lower than before imprisonment, controlling for changes in age, work experience, and schooling. The economic penalties of incarceration for ex-prisoners, however, do not necessarily translate into economic losses for their families. If men going to prison are only weakly connected to their families or make little financial contribution to their household, their earnings loss while incarcerated and poor job prospects after release may have little effect on the family economy.

A parent in prison may also impose a direct financial burden, however. The costs of visiting far-flung facilities, accepting collect calls, and retaining legal representation all add to the financial strains of poor families. The extent of these costs is largely unknown. The economic effect of mass incarceration on families is thus fundamentally an empirical question. Research on the pay and employment of ex-prisoners suggests that the economic effects of mass incarceration on families may be large, but this hinges on the strength of the connection between crime-involved men and their families before and after incarceration.

*What are the effects of incarceration on the supervision and socialization of children?* As with the question of economic effects, much turns here on the involvement of incarcerated fathers in their families before they were sent to prison. If fathers were not highly involved, the effects of incarceration would be quite small. Inmate surveys show that nearly half of state prisoners who are fathers were living with at least some of their children at the time of their incarceration. For those children, incarceration contributes to family breakup. Poor fathers, even if nonresident, frequently maintain some kind of supportive relationship with their partners and children. For these children, paternal incarceration likely involves the loss of an adult figure that could play some role in the supervision and socialization of children.

We have seen that rates of maternal incarceration are much lower, but incarcerated mothers are more likely to be living with their children at the time of imprisonment. Again, the effects of imprisonment depend on the quality of the relationship between parent and child, and here relatively little is known. While the loss of a parent to the criminal justice system likely affects the socialization of children, children's aspirations and sense of self-worth are likely to be affected by the stigma of imprisonment. Although Goffman (1963) writes about the contagious character of social stigma, few studies have examined how children may be affected in their peer groups or at school (though see Comfort 2002).

We have argued here that the emergence of mass imprisonment has transformed the institutional context of America's urban poor. In this sense, this new era of mass incarceration adds another chapter to Moynihan's original analysis of urban poverty and its social correlates. The data suggest that the prison boom has been massively corrosive for family structure and family life, but much work

remains to be done. In the background of this research agenda is the key question of the durability of urban poverty in the era of mass incarceration. If pervasive imprisonment undermines family life and disrupts the developmental path of children into young adulthood, the inequalities produced by mass incarceration may be exceptionally enduring. If the children of the prison boom are at greater risk of poverty and violence and are more involved in crime themselves, they too will risk following their parents into prison. Under these circumstances, the inequalities of mass incarceration will be sustained not just over a lifetime, but from one generation to the next.

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