The Consequences of Partner Incarceration for Women's Employment

Extended Abstract for PAA 2015

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Abstract

The upward trend in the incarceration rate has important collateral consequences for families. Although dealing with family stresses created by men's incarceration falls primarily to the women they leave behind, little research focuses on how women manage these stresses. Most men provide financial support for their families before imprisonment, and when they are imprisoned their families' household incomes are reduced. This paper uses the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to investigate women's adjustments of their employment levels in response to the imprisonment of their romantic partners. The study also examines the role played by family structure and relationship status in women's employment changes. Preliminary descriptive results suggest that women are more likely to increase their weeks of employment than to decrease them in response to the imprisonment of their romantic partners. Yet, they are just as likely to increase or decrease the number of hours they work per week.

INTRODUCTION

Research on the collateral consequences of incarceration documents the limited opportunities men have to earn income while in prison and the difficulties they face finding employment upon release or earning decent wages when they do find work (Western, 2006; Pager, 2003). Yet, little research considers the impact of men's incarceration on the ways in which women they are connected to participate in paid labor. The impact of incarceration on men's economic outcomes has consequences for the economic stability of his family (Schwartz-Soicher, Geller & Garfinkel, 2012; Geller, Garfinkel & Western, 2011), and romantic partners of imprisoned men may change the way they participate in the labor market in attempt to mitigate the economic difficulties they face.

Incarcerated men do not exist in isolation; they are connected in relationships with other people. Most prisoners have children and many are in romantic relationships prior to incarceration (Mumola, 2000; Western, 2006). In addition, they often make economic contributions to these families. Although prisoner's earnings before incarceration may be modest, when he goes to prison, his family experiences an immediate reduction in household income (Johnson, 2008). This reduction is likely most salient for women who had have romantic partners removed from their homes via incarceration, but the economic consequences of men's imprisonment likely reverberate in the families of women no longer romantically involved with incarcerated men since they may have received formal or informal child support prior to incarceration (Geller, Garfinkel & Western, 2011). How do women modify their behavior in response to men's imprisonment as they attempt to mitigate the material hardships it brings (Schwartz-Soicher, Geller & Garfinkel, 2012)? We know that families of incarcerated men respond by increasing their participation in certain social welfare programs (Sugie, 2012), but we know little else about women's strategies for maintaining their family's standard of living. In the wake of a reduction in household income due to a romantic partner's incarceration, do women respond by increasing their employment? Do they take on additional hours or additional jobs?

Although men's imprisonment may create a need for women's income from employment, women's ability to increase their employment may be impeded by the added caregiving and household responsibilities produced by their partners' absences. When a woman experiences romantic partner incarceration, she may need to reduce her participation in paid labor in order to care for children (Arditti, Lamber-Shute and Joest, 2003), particularly in situations where her employment had been supported by her partner's help in caring for their children – a care contribution that may have taken place regardless of the relationship status of the parents. The unavailability of the incarcerated individual for child care may increase work-family conflict and lead women to leave their jobs or to lose their jobs because of the strains associated with single parenthood or solo caregiving.

In addition to reducing resources, ethnographic research shows that incarceration is associated with a number of financial costs for families if women wish to maintain connections to incarcerated men (Comfort, 2008; Braman, 2004; Grinstead, Faigeles, Bancroft and Zack, 2001). Men's incarceration may require additional income to cover the cost of traveling for prison visits, taking collect calls, sending packages, and putting money in commissary (Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2008; Hairston, 1998). The costs of caring for a man while in prison or helping him manage legal debt associated with his imprisonment (Harris, Evans & Beckett, 2010) may also encourage women to increase their employment. However, prisons are often far away which makes maintaining a connection to an incarcerated man time consuming, and this care work may leave little room for increases. We may instead see a reduction in employment to accommodate the time required to maintain a relationship with an incarcerated man.

Family structure is likely to influence how a woman responds to the incarceration of her current or former romantic partner.[1] The presence of other family members to compensate for the losses and costs connected to incarceration may lessen the impact on women's work outcomes. Living in extended-family households, for example, allows for greater flexibility in allocating economic and domestic roles (Angel & Tienda, 1992; Stack & Burton, 1993). Furthermore, it is important to conceptualize family structure as dynamic (Jarrett & Burton, 1999). Household composition may change during a man's imprisonment. A family member may move in to help with childcare, or a new cohabiting partner may enter the household. Family members may move out because of union formation or job opportunities. The household in which

[1] "Current or former romantic partner" is used here to refer to the father of the focal child. The data does not allow me to consider the association between women's employment and the incarceration of the men defined in the survey as "current partner" – men who were not the father of the focal child but became romantically involved with the child's mother during the course of the study.

the woman resides may also change. For example, a young woman living with her partner who goes to prison may move in with her parents. These changes in household structure may be direct outcomes of men's incarceration, or they may be strategies for addressing the losses and costs of incarceration for families. They may also have other impetuses. In either case these composition changes, in addition to the change brought about by men's removal, has implications for how women participate in paid labor.

I advance social scientists' understanding of the collateral consequences of mass incarceration by investigating the impact of men's imprisonment on the economic situation of his family but shift the focus from men to the women who bear the responsibility for "shor[ing] up families experiencing extreme hardship" (Roberts, 2004, p. 1282). Specifically, I ask: is there an association between women's experience of current or former romantic partner incarceration and changes in her employment? Further, is the role of incarceration moderated by the status of woman's relationship with the imprisoned man or the structure of her household – the presence of relatives or a new romantic partner? Does incarceration spur additional changes in household structure that then impact her employment level? Institutional shifts have gendered consequences, and studying the impact of men's imprisonment on their current and former romantic partners is essential to gain an understanding of the full spectrum of the consequences of mass incarceration.

DATA AND METHODS

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study is a longitudinal survey that follows a cohort of new and mostly unmarried parents in 20 cities with populations over 200,000. It began in 1998 with interviews of a sample of nearly 5,000 parents shortly following the birth of their child, and subsequent interviews were conducted one, three, five, and nine years later. The analytical sample for this paper consists of 2,567 women for whom *weeks of work* and *hours of work* can be determined at the one, three, five and nine year follow ups (information about work was not collected at the baseline interview). These data are particularly suitable for studying the impact of partners' incarceration on women's employment both because of structure and content. Because the Fragile Families data include an oversample of unmarried parents in large cities, the sample is economically disadvantaged and includes a substantial number of incarcerated men. In total, 320 women experience the incarceration of their current or former partner between the first and ninth year follow-up survey (not including those incarcerated at the first year follow-up). The study's focus on a child and the child's parents rather than a single individual or household gives us information about the lives of families, defined broadly to include married and cohabiting couples as well as nonresidential partnerships and separated couples who share children; this kind of information is not available from other data sources. Fragile Families also provides substantial information about respondents' work behaviors and family incomes as well as factors that might affect the likelihood of both romantic partner incarceration and employment. The longitudinal nature of the data allows me to time order important variables and compare women's employment before and after their partner is imprisoned.

To examine the association between women's experience of romantic partner incarceration and their work outcomes, I plan to use fixed effects models (Allison, 2009). Fixed effects models are particularly useful for studying changes in women's employment due to partner incarceration because they are designed to study the causes of changes within a person. Fixed effects models also isolate the effects of incarceration from the effects of unobservable differences that might be correlated with both having an incarcerated romantic partner and employment changes. This avoids confounding the causal effect of incarceration with stable differences between women and increases the likelihood that observed differences in women's employment are a result of her romantic partner's incarceration rather than to pre-incarceration characteristics.

The outcomes of interest, changes in women's employment levels, are based on women's self-report of her weeks of work in the previous year, her hours of work in at her current or most recent job, and when she last worked for pay. *Weeks of work* and *hours of work* will be regressed separately on men's incarceration while controlling for a range of potentially relevant time-varying measures (including human capital, forms of household income other than the woman's earned wages, health status, etc.). To examine the moderating role played by family structure, variables measuring the status of a woman's relationship with the imprisoned man and the presence of other adults in the household will be interacted with the incarceration variable. To investigate the mediating role of family structure, I will first determine whether there is a relationship between romantic partner incarceration and changes in household

structure and relationship status—the entrance of a relative into the household or the formation of a new romantic relationship (both residential and nonresidential). The relevant household structure and relationship status measures will then be added to the models to determine the extent to which they account for the relationship between romantic partner incarceration and women's employment.

PRELIMINARY DESCRIPTIVE RESULTS

Table 1 shows that women who have experienced the incarceration of their current or former partner are different than other women on several characteristics. Women with incarcerated partners are less economically secure; they are more likely to report material hardship, live in poverty, and receive food stamps, TANF and SSI. They are less likely to be married to or cohabiting with the father of the study's focal child, and they are more likely to have a new romantic partner either living in the household or residing elsewhere. They are more likely to have other relatives living in the household. Women who have experience partner incarceration are also younger, less educated and more likely to be black than women who have not experienced partner incarceration.

Table 1. Differences between Women, by Partner Incarceration (Year 9)

Variable	Partner incarceration	No partner incarceration
Demographic Characteristics		
Age	31.4	35.0
	(4.4)	(6.0)
Race[a]		
White, non-Hispanic	15.3	25.6
Black, non-Hispanic	65.3	46.0
Hispanic	18.4	24.2
Other	.9	4.0
Immigrant[a]	1.6	13.8
Human Capital Characteristics		
In Poor Health	3.8	1.7
Spanish Primary Language	1.6	7.0
Highest Education		
Less than High School	21.3	17.3
High School/GED	20.9	20.8
Some College	52.5	41.4
College or More	17.0	20.5
No Work Experience	1.9	2.5
Family Economic Situation		
Household Income (in relation to poverty line)		
Less than 50%	22.8	14.2
50-99%	26.6	16.6
100-199%	32.8	29.0
200-299%	11.3	15.4
300+%	5.3	24.3
Social Services (in last 12 months)		
TANF	19.4	10.6
Food Stamps	67.2	39.3
Disability/SSI (respondent)	4.1	2.9
Disability/SSI (child)	5.9	5.2
Material hardship[b]	30.3	21.9
Owns home	7.8	12.2

Relationship Status	Incarceration	No incarceration
Relationship with Focal Child's Father		
Married	6.6	35.3
Cohabiting	5.6	9.1
Involved but Living Apart	3.8	1.7
Separated/Divorced/Widowed	13.8	13.0
Other	70.3	41.0
New romantic partner		
Residential	27.2	19.2
Nonresidential	20.0	12.2
Household Structure		
Presence of Relatives in Household		
Focal child's grandparent	15.0	10.0
Other relatives	6.1	2.9
Number of adults in household (including self)	1.7	2.0
	(1.0)	(0.9)
Number of children in household	2.9	2.6
	(1.5)	(1.3)

a. Measured at baseline interview
b. Following Percheski (2008), a family is considered to experience material hardship if the woman reports that her family experienced three or more hardships on a list that includes not paying full rent or utilities, having utilities shut off, and going without food or healthcare in the past 12 months.

Regarding the outcomes of interest, 42 percent of women who experienced romantic partner incarceration increased their *weeks of work* from the survey prior to incarceration to the survey following incarceration, and 32 percent decreased their *weeks of work*. However, it appears the women are equally as likely to increase or decrease their *hours of work* from the survey prior to incarceration to the survey following incarceration; 38 percent increased and 38 percent decreased their hours. A number of factors may explain the increase in average number of weeks women work per year but maintenance of their average hours per week. The fixed effects models will explore those factors—with emphasis on how family structure enables or reduces the employment levels of women with incarcerated romantic partners. Future analyses will also examine additional outcomes—changes in week and hours of off the books work, taking on additional jobs, and receipt of disability—all of which represent strategies women may use to manage household finances when their partners are incarcerated.

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