

# Neither here nor there: Incarceration and family instability

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Family instability in the United States has increased dramatically since the 1970s. Demographic changes in family life including postponement of marriage, more short-term cohabiting unions, and a dramatic increase in the rate of births to unmarried parents, mean that considerable numbers of adults and children experience frequent relationship churning in their family lives. Family instability has been found to impede parenting practices, increase stress and mental health problems, reduce social support networks, and increase poverty and material hardship. Instability is also linked to many detrimental outcomes for children, including behavioral problems, reduced educational achievement and attainment, and health deficiencies. Some scholars have suggested that family instability, which is disproportionately concentrated among economically disadvantaged groups, may increase income inequality and contribute to the intergenerational transmission of poverty.<sup>1</sup>

Another recent demographic change in the United States—the rapid and dramatic rise in mass incarceration—may contribute to family instability. About 2.3 million U.S. residents (1 in every 134 individuals) are incarcerated in prisons or jails, and even larger numbers of individuals have been recently released back to their families and communities.<sup>2</sup> There are compelling reasons to believe that mass incarceration, most often experienced by poorly educated minority men, contributes to family instability.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, most of these men—prior to confinement, while behind bars, and after release—are connected to families as romantic partners and fathers.<sup>4</sup>

Incarcerated men are simultaneously members of and isolated from families, and are by and large unable to perform their roles as romantic partners and fathers. Maintaining contact with incarcerated partners is difficult and costly for women, while men, upon their release, may face a variety of consequences including stigma and discrimination, difficulty finding employment, and increased physical and mental health problems. All of these consequences could make reintegration into family life difficult.

Despite considerable recent research on the effects of incarceration on family life more generally, as well as a vast literature documenting how marriage leads to a reduction in crime, there has been much less research on the consequenc-

es of incarceration for the dissolution of marital, cohabiting, and nonresidential romantic relationships.<sup>5</sup> Given the considerable number of families affected by incarceration, the unequal distribution of incarceration across the population, and the potential consequences of family instability for the intergenerational transmission of inequality, understanding how the expanding penal system affects relationship dissolution is an important new area of research.

I explore the possible connections in this article, examining analyses done using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a longitudinal survey of parents who share children. I consider three previously unexplored research questions that extend our knowledge about the collateral effects of incarceration on relationship dissolution. First, how is paternal incarceration associated with dissolution among couples that share children? Second, does this association vary by parents' relationship status when their child was born? Third, to what extent do post-incarceration changes in family life (including relationship quality, economic well-being, and physical and mental health) explain the association between incarceration and relationship dissolution?

## **Betwixt and between: The status of incarcerated men**

The recent dramatic rise in incarceration, resulting largely from increased harsh sentencing policies for nonviolent offenses, has had profound implications for the lives of American men. Incarceration has especially transformed the life course of low-educated minority men living in impoverished neighborhoods. Approximately 60 percent of black men without a high school diploma have served time in prison by their early 30s.<sup>6</sup> For many young black men, incarceration has become a normative life course stage and a rite of passage. Isolation is common, both in prison and upon release, and police presence, which is heightened in poor communities, can make it more difficult for former prisoners to adjust to life after incarceration. Formerly incarcerated men frequently experience discrimination, encounter political disenfranchisement, and have difficulty securing stable housing.<sup>7</sup> Further, those who have outstanding warrants, even for minor infractions, may avoid formal employment, hospitals, and sometimes even family and friends for fear of going back to prison.<sup>8</sup>

Additionally, incarcerated men experience a “liminal” state that complicates the maintenance of romantic relationships. Liminality refers to individuals who are “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned

and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony.<sup>9</sup> Liminality, according to Victor Turner, begins when individuals are removed and isolated from society, and ends with individuals reintegrating back into normal life and assuming their former roles.<sup>10</sup> During the liminal stage, individuals' roles become increasingly ambiguous, with their rights and obligations unclearly defined and aspects of their future uncertain. Incarceration forces people into a liminal state.

Turner's conception of liminality did not include predictions about its consequences, but it is plausible that this stage has lasting, negative consequences for individuals. For incarcerated men, their role in family life, in particular, becomes suspended between what they left behind and an unknown future. These men are members of families, but simultaneously isolated from those families. Therefore, it is possible that this liminality leads to relationship dissolution. While some women are committed to maintaining relationships with incarcerated partners, doing so is complicated.<sup>11</sup> Incarcerated individuals have limited, regulated, and institutionalized contact with romantic partners. Prisons are often located far from inmates' communities, which can make visits time-consuming and expensive. One researcher estimates that 60 percent of prison inmates are located more than 100 miles from their families.<sup>12</sup> The often inflexible visiting schedules and the expense of making long-distance calls from prisons complicate relationship maintenance. The physical separation of partners may create deficits in emotional interactions and increased household labor for the partner left behind.<sup>13</sup>

Incarceration may also create ambiguous family boundaries, leaving men confused about their identities as romantic partners and fathers, and leaving women without economic and emotional support crucial for maintaining successful relationships.<sup>14</sup> The difficulties faced by these marginal men likely continue after release, as men struggle to reintegrate into family life with partners who have moved on, both psychologically and romantically.<sup>15</sup> The stigma of incarceration, including the spillover stigma experienced by families of the incarcerated, may also make former inmates' reintegration into family life difficult.

## **Mechanisms linking incarceration and relationship dissolution**

There are at least three plausible mechanisms that may link incarceration to relationship dissolution: changes in relationship quality, changes in economic well-being, and changes in physical and mental health resulting from the incarceration experience.

For one, the association between incarceration and relationship dissolution may operate through changes in relationship quality. Although men often return to their pre-incarceration families and communities after release, the isolating and regimented prison experience may alter their personalities in ways that make maintaining romantic relationships difficult. Even among couples with high-quality relationships prior to

incarceration, the time spent apart may lead to poor communication, decreased supportiveness, and increased conflict. Ethnographic work shows that the incarceration experience may encourage men to engage in violent behavior.<sup>16</sup> Romantic partners who experience a significant drop in relationship quality are likely to dissolve their union.

In addition, incarceration may diminish economic well-being—among both the incarcerated and their romantic partners—and, therefore, increase relationship dissolution. Incarcerated men have few opportunities to earn income and, after release their criminal record makes it difficult to find employment. Women attached to incarcerated men may also have increased parenting and household responsibilities that force them to leave the paid labor force, and thus impede their ability to maintain the family's economic standard of living.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, perhaps because most men contribute economically to their families prior to incarceration, research shows that incarceration reduces family income, intensifies material hardship, and increases reliance on some forms of public assistance.<sup>18</sup> The stress associated with economic insecurity may create conflict within families and lead to dissolution.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, the association between incarceration and relationship dissolution may operate through changes in physical and mental health patterns among both partners. The physical and mental health consequences of incarceration have been documented, but these effects may extend beyond the offender.<sup>20</sup> Qualitative research documents that the incarceration of a romantic partner is associated with anxiety, uncertainty, and loneliness.<sup>21</sup> These feelings may persist after release, as women worry about their partners violating parole and their children's adjustment to their father's return.<sup>22</sup> Poor physical and mental health have been linked to union dissolution.<sup>23</sup>

## **Existing evidence on the consequences of incarceration for relationship dissolution**

What does existing literature say about the effect of incarceration on relationship dissolution in the United States? By and large, quantitative research suggests that incarceration increases marital dissolution. For example, data from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth 1979, a longitudinal study uniquely positioned and often used to study the consequences of incarceration, finds that incarcerated men have a higher probability of divorce or separation than their non-incarcerated counterparts.<sup>24</sup> Other researchers find that this association between incarceration and divorce is explained by the length of incarceration.<sup>25</sup>

Qualitative research on nonmarital relationships documents a more complicated and nuanced portrait of family life during and after a partner's incarceration than does quantitative research on marital relationships. These qualitative portraits show that relationship stability and instability result from a complex interplay of both men's and women's reactions

to the incarceration. Men, for example, may use incarceration as a time to reflect on their familial roles. Their liminal status may lead to internal confusion, but some men return to families ready to reprise their roles as romantic partners and fathers.<sup>26</sup> Women's perspectives have been shown to be equally nuanced; some women are committed to maintaining relationships with incarcerated partners, while others use the incarceration as an excuse to hasten an inevitable breakup.<sup>27</sup>

### Variation by relationship status

As suggested above, the effects of incarceration on relationship dissolution may be moderated by relationship type, and research has yet to thoroughly examine this possibility.<sup>28</sup> It is possible that incarceration equally disrupts marital, cohabiting, and nonresidential romantic relationships. Many features of incarceration—the removal of men from families and communities, the challenges associated with maintaining romantic relationships while a romantic partner is behind bars, and the liminal status of incarceration—may be difficult for couples in all types of relationships. Similarly, the mechanisms linking incarceration to relationship dissolution—changes in relationship quality, economic well-being, and physical and mental health—may also equally affect marital, cohabiting, and nonresidential romantic relationships.

It is also possible, however, that the association varies by relationship type prior to incarceration. On the one hand, incarceration may be more consequential for marital relationships than cohabiting or nonresidential romantic relationships. Indeed, Tach and Edin find that relationship and economic conditions are more strongly associated with the dissolution of marital than cohabiting unions.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, marital unions are governed by greater norms and expectations than other unions, which may cause some individuals to salvage their marriage and avoid divorce at all costs.

## Results

I use data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to assess: (1) how paternal incarceration is associated with relationship dissolution among couples that share children; (2) whether this association varies by parents' relationship status at the time of their child's birth; and (3) to what extent the association between incarceration and relationship dissolution can be explained by post-incarceration changes in family life, including relationship quality, economic well-being, and physical and mental health.

I look first at the relationship between incarceration and relationship dissolution. As expected, the likelihood of a breakup, especially early in the child's life, varies quite dramatically by father's incarceration. However, given the very different characteristics of couples that do and do not experience incarceration, these differences may result not from incarceration but instead from other factors associated with both incarceration and relationship dissolution. Using various models to control for these factors, my results sug-

gest that the association between incarceration and relationship dissolution is large in magnitude but relatively short-lived.<sup>30</sup> When partners manage to survive the initial period of confinement, incarceration has no lasting consequences on dissolution.

Next, I consider the possibility that the association between incarceration and relationship dissolution varies by relationship status. Given that results for the full sample show no association between incarceration and delayed relationship dissolution, I consider only dissolution within a two year period. The results for both married couples and couples cohabiting at the time of their child's birth show the same relationship between incarceration and relationship dissolution that was found for the full sample. Although analyses of couples in a nonresidential romantic relationship at the time of their child's birth show no independent association between incarceration and relationship dissolution, interaction terms included in models estimating dissolution for the full sample are statistically insignificant, suggesting that the relationship between incarceration and relationship dissolution does not vary by relationship status.<sup>31</sup> These results should be interpreted cautiously, as it is quite possible the statistically insignificant interaction terms result from the small sample size. Indeed, the direction of interaction effects for nonresidential romantic couples suggests that incarceration may be less harmful for their relationships than for married relationships.

Finally, I look at mechanisms underlying the association between incarceration and relationship dissolution. The association between incarceration and relationship dissolution may result from the direct effect of incarceration, or alternatively may result from a number of indirect pathways including changes in relationship quality, changes in economic well-being, and changes in physical and mental health. Additional analyses provide little evidence that most theorized mechanisms—including declining relationship quality, reduced economic well-being, and worse physical and mental health—explain the link between incarceration and relationship dissolution.

## Conclusions

My analysis of how incarceration affects relationship dissolution yields three main conclusions. Perhaps most consequentially, results show that among couples with children, incarceration leads to a greater likelihood of relatively immediate relationship dissolution. Since couples who separate before their child turns three are excluded from the sample, these results are conservative. Second, I find no clear evidence that the association between incarceration and dissolution varies among married, cohabiting, and nonresidential couples. Considering this possibility is important, as it bridges the quantitative research on the effects of incarceration for divorce and the qualitative literature on mostly unmarried couples. These findings suggest that, regardless of level of relationship commitment, maintaining relationships

while one partner is behind bars is difficult. Importantly, these results also suggest that previous quantitative research, which has nearly exclusively considered marital dissolution, underestimates the consequences of incarceration for family life. Third, I find that three plausible mechanisms—changes in relationship quality, changes in economic well-being, and changes in physical and mental health resulting from incarceration—explain, by and large, very little of the association between incarceration and relationship dissolution. One explanation for these findings is that this association stems directly from the liminality associated with incarceration. The ambiguity associated with the period of confinement, the resultant changes in men’s personalities, or women’s opportunities to meet other partners may have direct, negative implications for their romantic relationships. When unions dissolve during incarceration, as opposed to after re-entry, liminality may be further intensified.

An alternative possibility, of course, is that other unmeasured pathways—such as women’s increasing share of household labor, infrequency of contact between partners during confinement, or declining family support—link incarceration to relationship dissolution. Though the data do not permit an examination of these possibilities, it seems unlikely that these factors—but not changes in relationship quality, which are correlated with these factors—would explain this large association. In this study, data on relationship status were collected at study entry and three, five, and nine years later. Future quantitative research should collect data at more regular intervals (such as weekly or monthly) to more precisely identify the timing of dissolution and further unravel the familial and decision-making processes leading to dissolution. Future qualitative research should systematically consider the processes underlying dissolution among marital and nonmarital couples.

Taken together, my findings on incarceration and relationship dissolution make several important theoretical and empirical contributions. The theoretical contributions are primarily related to liminality. I draw on the work of Victor Turner, who first put forth the idea of liminality (primarily to describe rites of passage), to suggest that incarceration embodies a liminal experience. Incarcerated men are “betwixt and between”—they are currently separated and isolated from their families. But, at the same time, they are members of families and eventually will be reintegrated into society and at least some of their family roles. Additionally, I extend Turner’s theory to consider the consequences of this status, and show that the liminality of incarceration often leads to relationship dissolution and thereby further marginalizes already marginal men.

Empirically, my findings advance our knowledge about incarceration and relationship dissolution in several ways. First, I consider dissolution among married, cohabiting, and nonresidential romantic couples. The consideration of multiple relationship types is important because the modal prisoner is in a romantic relationship but not a marital one. This is also important because children—especially chil-

dren in disadvantaged communities where incarceration is common—are increasingly born to unmarried parents and experience poor outcomes when these unions dissolve. I also consider both short-term jail spells, the most common type of incarceration, and long-term prison spells. This, in combination with the focus on both marital and nonmarital relationships, means the results are applicable to a much broader group of the population than was the case for previous research.

Though data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Survey provide an exceptional opportunity to examine the consequences of incarceration for family life, the data have several limitations. To begin with, the incarceration measure is limited, as it does not distinguish between different lengths of incarceration, nor between prison and jail incarceration. It is possible that both of these factors may differentially affect family instability. Similarly, the association between incarceration and relationship dissolution may vary by the father’s distance from home or the frequency of mother’s visits. The data also do not include the precise timing of relationship dissolution, and is instead limited to broad time periods.

In order to ensure that incarceration precedes dissolution, a necessary requirement to estimate the causal link from incarceration to relationship dissolution, I must examine only current incarceration—as opposed to incarceration that occurred in the recent past—which limits the sample size. The sample is further limited by fathers at risk of relationship dissolution (those in a romantic relationship at the three-year survey). Even with these sample restrictions, these analyses preclude causal conclusions. Unobserved heterogeneity may exist, though findings from sensitivity analyses suggest that is unlikely that the results are explained by it.

Despite the data limitations, my findings add to a growing body of literature on the consequences of paternal incarceration for family life and the intergenerational transmission of inequality. Similar to the recent demographic changes that have transformed family life, such as trends in nonmarital childbearing, incarceration rates, as well as social inequality in incarceration rates, have increased rapidly over the past four decades. Incarcerated individuals do not exist in isolation. Instead, while incarcerated, they experience a period of liminality where they are both connected to and disconnected from their families, which contributes to relationship dissolution. By documenting how and under what conditions the collateral consequences of incarceration extend beyond the offender, and spill over onto his family, this research highlights the considerable influence and unintended consequences of the penal system on family relationships. ■

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<sup>1</sup>See, for example, S. McLanahan and C. Percheski, “Family Structure and the Reproduction of Inequalities,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 34 (2008): 257–276.

<sup>2</sup>L. Glaze, *Correctional Populations in the United States, 2010*, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 2011.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, W. J. Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

<sup>4</sup>C. J. Mumola, *Incarcerated Parents and Their Children*. Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 2000.

<sup>5</sup>For the effects of incarceration on family life in general, see for example: C. Wildeman, J. Schnittker, and K. Turney, "Despair by Association? The Mental Health of Mothers with Children by Recently Incarcerated Fathers," *American Sociological Review* 77 (2012): 216–243; for the effects of marriage on crime, see for example R. D. King, M. Massoglia, and R. Macmillan, "The Context of Marriage and Crime: Gender, the Propensity to Marry, and Offending in Early Adulthood," *Criminology* 45 (2007): 33–65.

<sup>6</sup>B. Pettit and B. Western, "Mass Imprisonment and the Life Course: Race and Class Inequality in U.S. Incarceration," *American Sociological Review* 69 (2004): 151–169.

<sup>7</sup>For discrimination findings see D. Pager, "The Mark of a Criminal Record," *American Journal of Sociology* 108 (2003): 937–975; for political disenfranchisement see C. Uggen and J. Manza, "Democratic Contraction? Political Consequences of Felon Disenfranchisement in the United States," *American Sociological Review* 67 (2002): 777–803; and for housing, see A. Geller and M. A. Curtis, "A Sort of Homecoming: Incarceration and the Housing Security of Urban Men," *Social Science Research* 40 (2011): 1196–1213.

<sup>8</sup>A. Goffman, "On the Run: Wanted Men in a Philadelphia Ghetto," *American Sociological Review* 74 (2009): 339–357.

<sup>9</sup>V. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine Transaction, 1969).

<sup>10</sup>Individuals in a liminal state are eventually reintegrated into society. Therefore, those who are incarcerated for life without possibility of parole would not be considered to be in a liminal state.

<sup>11</sup>M. Comfort, *Doing Time Together: Love and Family in the Shadow of the Prison* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

<sup>12</sup>Mumola, *Incarcerated Parents and Their Children*.

<sup>13</sup>M. Massoglia, B. M. Michael, and R. D. King, "Stigma or Separation? Understanding the Incarceration-Divorce Relationship," *Social Forces* 90 (2011): 133–155.

<sup>14</sup>D. Braman, *Doing Time on the Outside: Incarceration and Family Life in Urban America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2004).

<sup>15</sup>A. M. Nurse, *Fatherhood Arrested: Parenting from Within the Juvenile Justice System* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002).

<sup>16</sup>Nurse, *Fatherhood Arrested*.

<sup>17</sup>J. A. Ardititi, J. Lambert-Shute, and K. Joest. "Saturday Morning at the Jail: Implications of Incarceration for Families and Children," *Family Relations* 52 (2003): 195–204.

<sup>18</sup>N. F. Sugie, "Punishment and Welfare: Paternal Incarceration and Families' Receipt of Public Assistance," *Social Forces* 90 (2012): 1403–1427.

<sup>19</sup>S. McLanahan, "Fragile Families and the Reproduction of Poverty," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 621, No. 1 (2009): 111–131.

<sup>20</sup>See, for example, J. Schnittker, M. Massoglia, and C. Uggen, "Out and Down: Incarceration and Psychiatric Disorders," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 53 (2012): 448–464.

<sup>21</sup>S. W. Daniel and C. J. Barrett, "The Needs of Prisoners' Wives: A Challenge for the Mental Health Professions," *Community Mental Health Journal* 17 (1981): 310–322.

<sup>22</sup>J. J. Turanovic, N. Rodriguez, and T. C. Pratt, "The Collateral Consequences of Incarceration Revisited: A Qualitative Analysis of the Effects on Caregivers of Children of Incarcerated Parents," *Criminology* 50 (2012): 913–959.

<sup>23</sup>R. H. Aseltine and R. C. Kessler, "Marital Disruption and Depression in a Community Sample," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 34 (1993): 237–251.

<sup>24</sup>L. M. Lopoo and B. Western, "Incarceration and the Formation and Stability of Marital Unions," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 67 (2005): 721–734; also see Apel, Robert, A. A. J. Blokland, P. Nieuwbeerta, and M. van Schellen, "The Impact of Imprisonment on Marriage and Divorce: A Risk Set Matching Approach," *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 26 (2010): 269–300 for an examination of the association between incarceration and divorce in The Netherlands.

<sup>25</sup>Massoglia, Remster, and King, "Stigma or Separation?"

<sup>26</sup>K. Edin, T. J. Nelson, and R. Paranal. "Fatherhood and Incarceration as Potential Turning Points in the Criminal Careers of Unskilled Men," in *Imprisoning America: The Social Effects of Mass Incarceration*, edited by M. Patillo, D. Weiman, and B. Western (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2004).

<sup>27</sup>For commitment to maintaining relationships, see Comfort, *Doing Time Together*; for using incarceration as an excuse to separate, see K. Edin and M. Kefalas, *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2005).

<sup>28</sup>Indeed, demographic changes in the United States mean that children are increasingly growing up in diverse family structures. Non-marital childbearing has risen steadily in recent years, and children born to unmarried parents now account for 41 percent of all births in the United States, including 72 percent of births to African Americans and 53 percent of births to Hispanics, see B. E. Hamilton, J. A. Martin, and S. J. Ventura, "Births: Preliminary Data for 2011," *National Vital Statistics Reports*, 61, No. 5 (2012). About half of unmarried parents are cohabiting when their child is born, see G. Martinez, K. Daniels, and A. Chandra, "Fertility of Men and Women Aged 15–44 Years in the United States: National Survey of Family Growth, 2006–2010," *National Health Statistics Report* 51 (2012).

<sup>29</sup>L. Tach and K. Edin, "The Compositional and Institutional Sources of Union Dissolution for Married and Unmarried Parents," *Demography* 50 (2013): 1789–1818.

<sup>30</sup>In supplemental analyses, I restricted the sample estimating immediate relationship dissolution to the smaller sample used to estimate delayed relationship dissolution. Results are consistent, suggesting the differential findings for immediate and delayed dissolution do not result from different samples.

<sup>31</sup>Results from propensity score models are similar to results from logistic regression models.