

# Incarceration and Stratification

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crime, punishment, inequality, race and ethnicity, poverty, class

## Abstract

In the past three decades, incarceration has become an increasingly powerful force for reproducing and reinforcing social inequalities. A new wave of sociological research details the contemporary experiment with mass incarceration in the United States and its attendant effects on social stratification. This review first describes the scope of imprisonment and the process of selection into prison. It then considers the implications of the prison boom for understanding inequalities in the labor market, educational attainment, health, families, and the intergenerational transmission of inequality. Social researchers have long understood selection into prison as a reflection of existing stratification processes. Today, research attention has shifted to the role of punishment in generating these inequalities.

## INTRODUCTION

With few exceptions, twentieth century reviews of social stratification and mobility research scarcely addressed punishment. But as U.S. incarceration rates rose to historically unprecedented levels, new work emerged to document this punitive turn and to consider its implications for inequality. Punishment has now grown too big to ignore, with stratification researchers characterizing incarceration as a powerful “engine of social inequality” (Western 2006, p. 198) that plays a “massive” (Pager 2009, p. 160) and racialized (Bobo & Thompson 2006) part in the contemporary stratification system. This review details the changing social conditions that thrust punishment onto the agenda of stratification researchers and the established and emerging findings from this research.

Sociologists have long understood inequality with reference to the stratifying institutions that sort people into more or less advantaged social categories (Grusky 2001), such as the educational system (Mare 1980) and the formal labor market (e.g., Correll et al. 2007). These institutions both reflect and create inequality by differentially conferring access and opportunity across social groups. They also play a part in the intergenerational transmission of inequality through the influence of family background on offspring attainment (Blau & Duncan 1967, Duncan et al. 1972, Duncan & Brooks-Gunn 1999, Lareau 2003) and family formation (Schwartz & Mare 2005). Although incarceration has received little attention in classic treatments of stratification, poverty, and racial and ethnic inequality (Blau & Duncan 1967, Breen & Jonsson 2005, Corcoran 1995, Handel 2003, Keister & Moller 2000, Kerckhoff 1995, Sorensen 1994, Williams & Collins 1995; but see Morris & Western 1999, Neckerman & Torche 2007), the prison now takes a place as a major stratifying institution in U.S. society.

Classic sociological conceptions of class, caste, and status group offer some utility for understanding the social position of people shar-

ing a common history of punishment (Uggen et al. 2006). Yet, although some have used a class language to describe a “criminal class” (Hagan & Palloni 1990) or a related “meshing” of ghetto and prison (Wacquant 2001), prisoners and former prisoners do not necessarily share a common class location or relation to the economic system. In some ways, they may be considered a subset of the disenfranchised poor (Wilson 1987), although they are defined by characteristics not shared by others in this category. Nor is it appropriate to consider all prisoners and former prisoners as a caste (Beteille 1996, Myrdal 1944). Aside from especially stigmatized subgroups, such as those designated as sex offenders, their social exclusion from economic, family, and civic activities rarely approaches caste-like levels.

Current and former prisoners are perhaps best characterized as a Weberian status group sharing similar life chances determined by a common and consequential mark of [dis]honor (Weber 1922 [1978]). In this regard, Pager (2009) understands criminal records as a disqualifying credential in the formal labor market. Moreover, the far-reaching status dishonor and stigma attaching to a felon’s legal standing reduces attainment in education, labor markets, and other domains. But whether current and former inmates are conceived as class, caste, status group, or some new amalgam, prison alters life chances in myriad ways that go to the heart of stratification research.

The discovery of incarceration has shaped diverse literatures in the past 15 years, as inequality scholars trace the long reach of the prison. Studies of prison health, for example, inform broad debates about persistent (and perplexing) race gaps in physical health. Research on the children of incarcerated parents similarly informs literatures on the effects of childhood disadvantage and parental divorce on attainment. Analysis of the growth and racial disparity in felon disenfranchisement contributes to work on political inequality and citizenship. These examples (among many others reviewed here) place the prison alongside institutions like the labor market and educational

system as a powerful mechanism for sorting and stratifying social actors. And, like other stratifying institutions, the prison both reflects pre-existing disparities and acts as an independent cause generating future disparities.

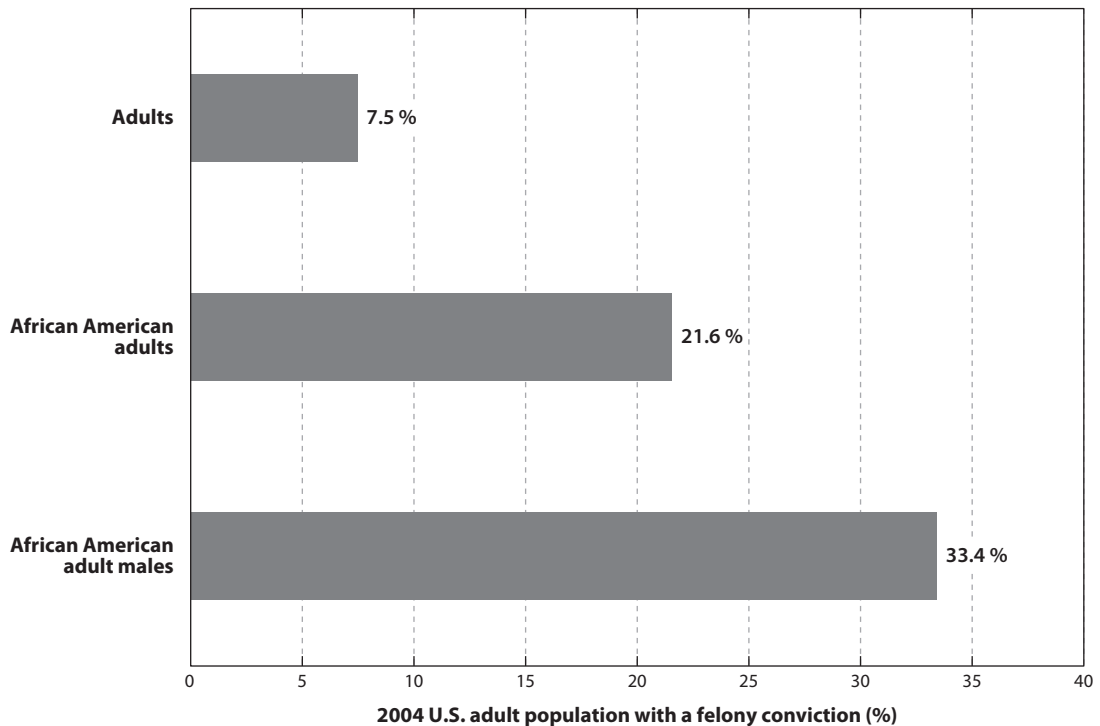
Although the links between incarceration and stratification apply more generally, the United States has been exceptional with regard to the scale and growth of its incarcerated population. The review thus emphasizes the contemporary U.S. experiment with mass incarceration, differentiating processes of selection into prison from the prison's role in generating inequality.

## THE PROLIFERATION OF PUNISHMENT

More than 700,000 people leave prison each year (West & Sabol 2007), about half of whom will be reincarcerated within three years

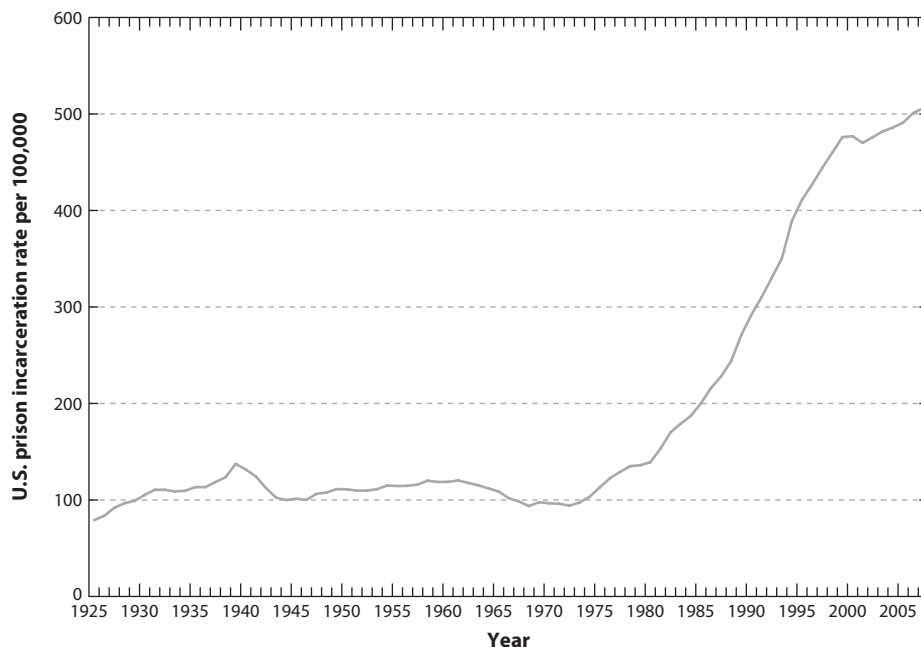
(Langan & Levin 2002). Many more serve felony-level sentences in county jails or are supervised on conditional release to probation or parole. All told, there are an estimated 16.1 million current or former felons in the United States, reflecting about 7.5% of the adult population (Uggen et al. 2006). As a point of comparison, this figure approximates the number of persons classified as unemployed by the Bureau of Labor Statistics during the deep recessionary period of 2008–2009 (15.7 million in October 2009; Bur. Labor Stat. 2009). As **Figure 1** shows, felony conviction rates are especially high for men and for African Americans, such that approximately one in three African American men now carry a serious criminal record.

Although many convicted felons are never imprisoned, an increasing proportion of U.S. residents have served time in a state or federal penitentiary. After decades of trendless



**Figure 1**

Percentage of U.S. adult population with a felony conviction, 2004.



**Figure 2**

U.S. prison incarceration rate per 100,000, 1925–2007.

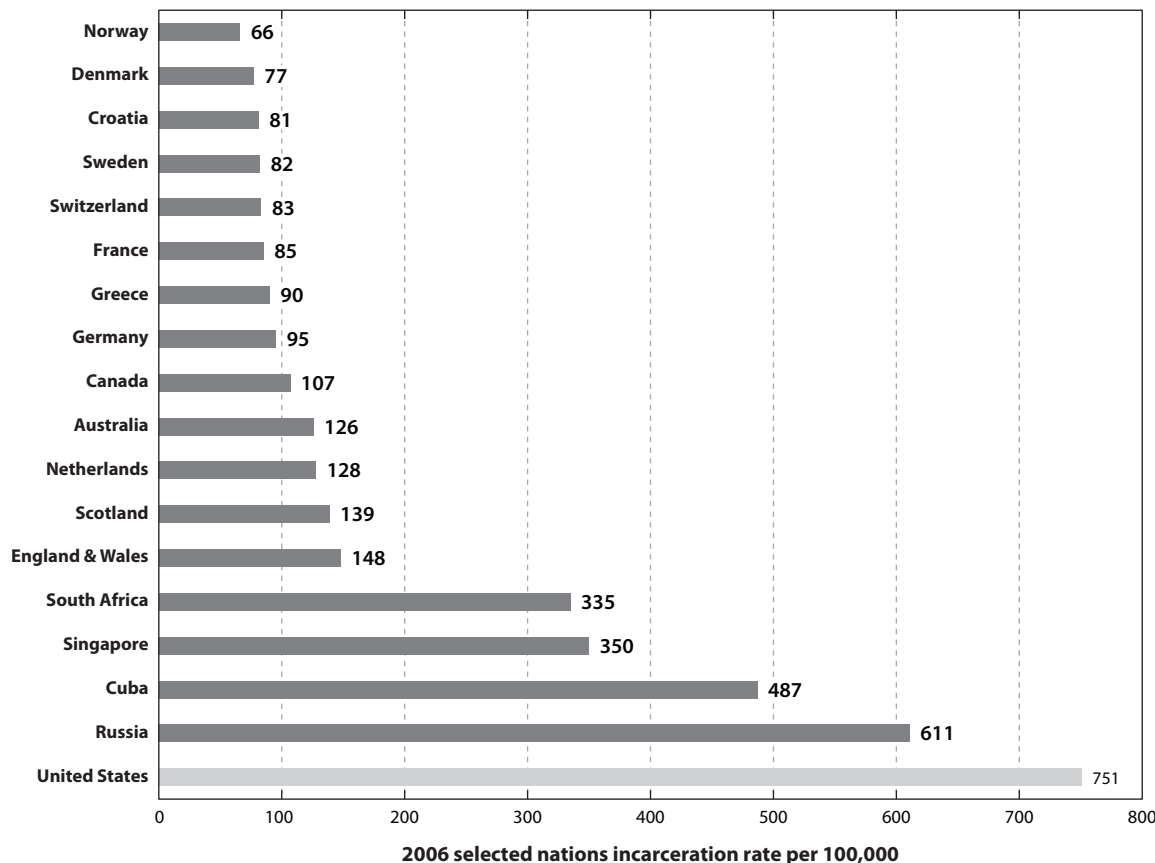
fluctuation, the prison incarceration rate began a steep ascent in 1973, rising by approximately 6% per year. By the first decade of the twenty-first century, the United States was incarcerating 1% of its population at any given time, with an additional 2% serving time on probation and parole (Glaze & Bonczar 2007, Pew Cent. 2008, Uggen et al. 2006, Western 2006). Incarceration on this scale is virtually unprecedented (see **Figure 2**).

The United States has had the highest incarceration rate in the world since 2002. **Figure 3** compares the U.S. situation with that of other nations for 2006. Although prison populations are growing in many parts of the world, the United States dwarfs them all, at jail and prison incarceration levels that are commonly five to seven times larger than those of other nations of similar economic, social or demographic profiles (Walmsley 2007). Few populous nations even approach U.S. rates, aside from Russia (at 611 per 100,000), Cuba (487), Ukraine (356), Singapore (350), and South Africa (335) (see **Figure 3**).

Finally, although national rates draw the most attention, these tend to mask significant state and regional variation (Greenberg & West 2001). For example, the U.S. prison incarceration rate was 508 per 100,000 in 2007, but rates were almost twice as high in the South (559) as in the Northeast (305) (West & Sabol 2009) (see **Figure 4**). While incarceration remains very high in Louisiana (858) and Texas (668), these states have reduced their prison populations in recent years. Today, the largest growth tends to be in states with relatively low base rates (e.g., Minnesota, Iowa, and New Hampshire) (see **Figure 4**).

## WHO GOES TO PRISON

Although the U.S. incarceration rate is high by any historical or comparative standard, enormous race and class disparities concentrate its effects on the most disadvantaged segments of society. The prison population partially reflects existing inequalities, such that disadvantaged individuals and groups tend to commit a



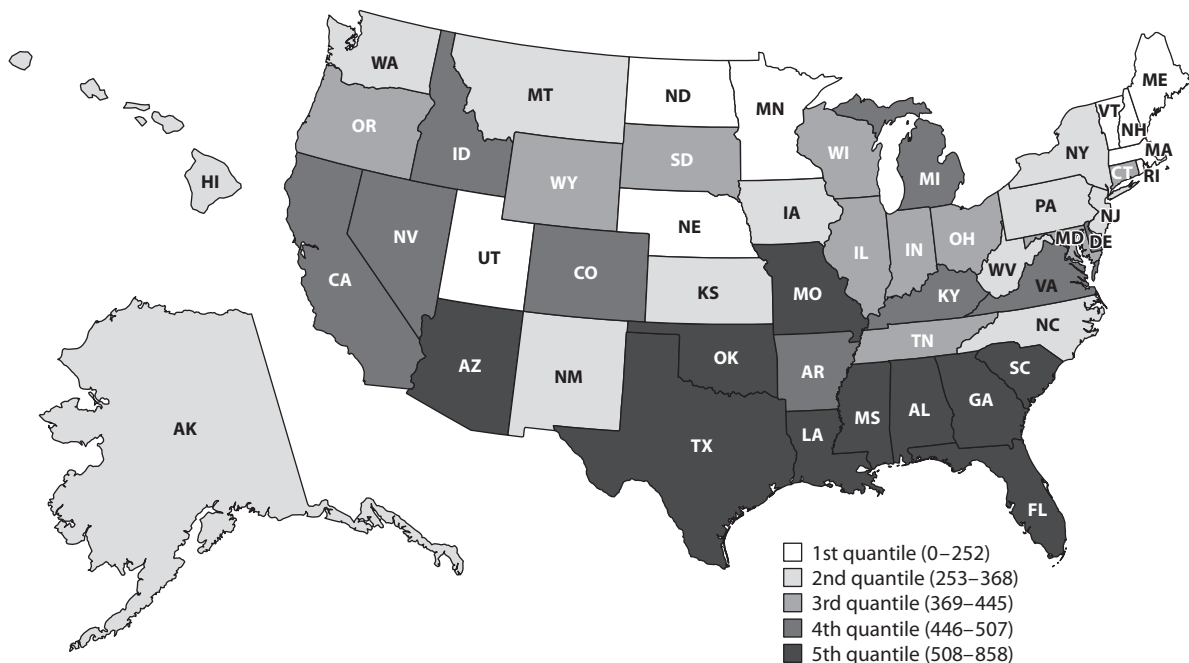
**Figure 3**

Incarceration rates per 100,000 for selected nations, 2006.

relatively greater share of the street crime that results in imprisonment. Although the relationship between crime and incarceration is beyond the scope of this review, it is clearly the case that race, class, and gender differences in imprisonment are due in part to differential involvement in crime (Pastore & Maguire 2007).

Nevertheless, the prison population does not map neatly onto the population of law violators. Significant gaps, especially with regard to race and social class, remain between self-report surveys of criminal involvement and official arrest statistics (see Morenoff 2005 for a review; Ousey & Lee 2008; but see D'Alessio & Stolzenberg 2003). Moreover, shifts in the risk of imprisonment for African American men do

not appear to have been driven by large shifts in the relative involvement of African American men in crime (Beckett et al. 2006, Blumstein & Beck 2005, Western 2006, Zimring & Hawkins 1993). The effects of poverty or inequality on crime are similarly complex (e.g., Blau & Blau 1982, Bushway & Reuter 2002, Cantor & Land 1985, Hagan & Peterson 1995), but prisons are most certainly filled with the poor (Wheelock & Uggen 2008). Finally, whereas men are arrested for the vast majority of crimes (Pastore & Maguire 2007, table 4.8) and make up 93% of the U.S. prison population (West & Sabol 2009), the growth in women's incarceration has far outpaced that of men in recent years (Heimer & Kruttschnitt 2005, Kruttschnitt & Gartner 2005).



**Figure 4**

State variation in prison incarceration rates per 100,000.

Nor is the prison boom solely attributable to significant increases in police efficiency or capacity. The probability of arrest has remained largely stable for the past 30 years, but the risk of incarceration once arrested has increased significantly (Blumstein & Beck 2005). Much of the growth in imprisonment has instead been attributed to an influx of low-level, low-rate delinquents into the prison system, rather than to greater efficiency in incarcerating especially dangerous or high-rate offenders (Blumstein & Beck 1999, Pfaff 2008, Raphael & Stoll 2007).

It is not the case, then, that differential involvement in crime wholly explains differences in incarceration. Rather, entry into prison is in part socially determined by differential exposure to police surveillance (Beckett et al. 2006, Tonry 1996), increases in the likelihood of charges resulting in convictions (Bridges & Steen 1998), differences in sentencing patterns (Steffensmeier et al. 1998), and a host of other structural factors. Rising imprisonment is similarly less tethered to the crime rate than to

other social processes (Blumstein & Beck 2005). Much of the growth in imprisonment since the 1970s, for example, has been attributed to sentencing disparities that put African Americans and Latinos in prison for drug crimes at higher rates than whites (Blumstein & Beck 1999, Mauer 1999, Tonry 1996), despite higher white rates of substance abuse (Bachman et al. 1991; see also Beckett et al. 2006).

The growth in incarceration has continued unabated despite major fluctuations in criminal activity and economic performance. Rising punishment is thus a policy choice rather than a natural response to sustained increases in crime. The rapid increase in the use of the prison as a response to crime is generally understood as the result of a series of cultural and demographic (Feeley & Simon 1992; Garland 1990, 2000), political (Beckett 1997, Jacobs & Helms 2001), and economic shifts (Western & Beckett 1999). There is widespread agreement that increases in the use of incarceration are “intensely political” (Jacobs & Helms 2001,

p. 171; see also Garland 1990, 2001; Beckett 1997; Savelsberg 1994; Sutton 2000). Nevertheless, scholars place different emphasis on the relative strength of these factors. Beckett (1997) and Garland (2000), for example, differ on the relative importance of media attention to crime and the malleability of public opinion. Scholars also disagree on the independent effects of political rhetoric on fear of crime and the extent to which political influences on incarceration are national or local in nature (see Jacobs & Helms 2001, Greenberg & West 2001).

Beckett (1997; see also Beckett & Sasson 2000) argues that increasing public punitiveness is the product of political realignment following Reconstruction and the creation of law-and-order politics, rather than a product of fear of crime (or the crime rate). The emergence of crime as a salient political tool is strongly linked to changes in sentencing practices, most notably the greater enforcement and severity of American drug laws. The move to fixed (as opposed to indeterminate) sentencing also increased prison populations by lengthening time served, as did the net-widening processes that brought new clients into the criminal and juvenile justice systems (Pfaff 2008, Raphael & Stoll 2007).

Just as the politicization of crime was a response to the racial politics of the early twentieth century, social scientists attribute racial disproportionality in imprisonment to political and institutional processes, racial threat, and lingering cultural fears of African American men (Beckett 1997, Feeley & Simon 1992, Garland 2001, Mauer 1999, Tonry 1996). The unambiguously racial character of imprisonment in the United States is described by Loic Wacquant as wholly “extrapenological”—not driven by crime rates, but by the desire to “manage dispossessed and dishonored groups,” just as slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and ghettos have in the recent past (Wacquant 2000, 2001). Prisons thus house the jobless, the poor, the racial minority, and the uneducated, not the merely criminal.

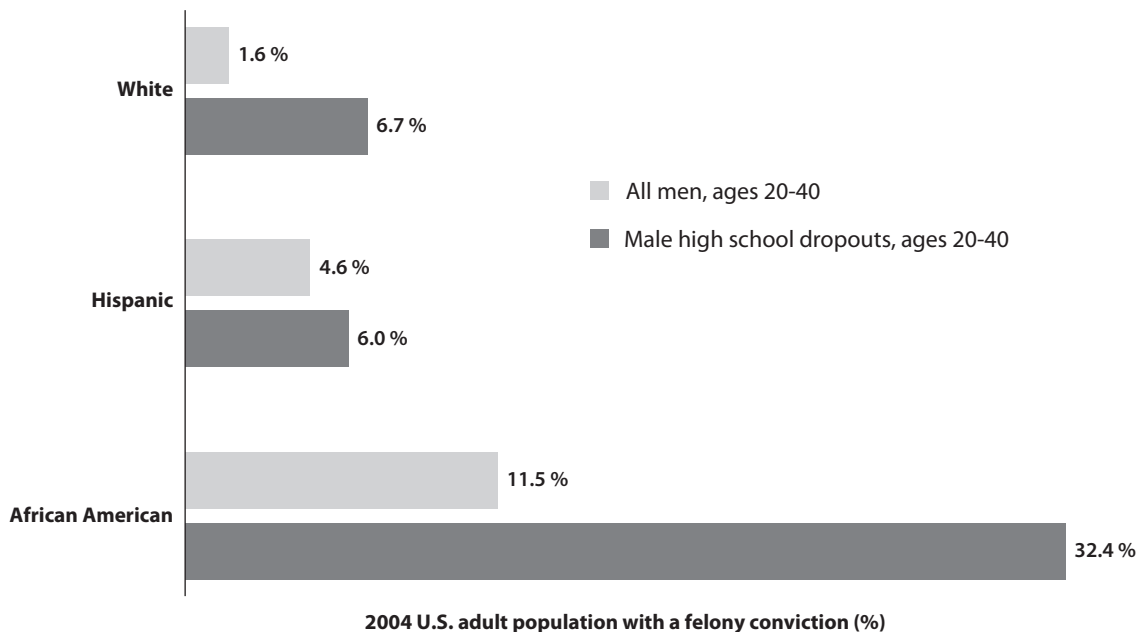
Although the politicization of crime leading to the prison boom was clearly racialized, the

concentration of incarceration among African Americans today remains astonishing (and especially relevant for stratification researchers) (Bridges & Steen 1998, Pettit & Western 2004, Western 2006). The intersection of race and low educational attainment is especially noteworthy (see **Figure 5**). For African American men with no high school degree, the lifetime likelihood of going to prison is roughly 60%—about five times higher than the estimate for white high school dropouts (Pettit & Western 2004, pp. 151, 161). According to Western’s (2006) analysis, twice as many African American men under age 40 have prison records as have college degrees.

Garland (2001) notes that mass incarceration in the United States is not simply defined by the imprisonment of large numbers of people, but rather by the “systematic imprisonment of whole groups of the population” (p. 2). Although this review has thus far documented high and racially disparate rates of incarceration, how does incarceration create and maintain inequality? The stratifying effects of imprisonment depend on (a) high rates of incarceration, (b) significant disparities in the likelihood of being imprisoned, and (c) the connections of current and former inmates to social institutions and significant others. We next review the consequences of incarceration for inmates and society, emphasizing research that makes explicit causal connections between imprisonment and the production of social inequality.

## HOW PRISONS GENERATE INEQUALITY

The correctional system classifies and sorts its clients just as schools, hospitals, and other social institutions classify and sort their clients. Although many incarcerated men and women have experienced some degree of conventional or criminal success, prisons tend to house those with the least human capital, financial capital, and social capital. In some ways, prisons are similar to schools in that individuals enter with varying abilities and skills and are then sorted



**Figure 5**

Differences in male incarceration by race, ethnicity, and education (Source: Western 2006, p. 19).

by these differences and placed onto differing tracks (see, e.g., Gamoran & Mare 1989). As in the educational system, sorting and tracking within prisons has the potential to compensate for disadvantage by selecting those most in need of assistance. If prisons are not successful in addressing deficits—and there is ample evidence to suggest they are not—widespread incarceration reinforces existing disadvantages, to the detriment of inmates and the communities to which they return. With the expansion of the U.S. prison population, such societal-level impacts may be more easily observed and measured.

Mass incarceration surely has some effect on crime rates outside of prisons, if only by incapacitating large numbers of people. Among many others, Levitt's (1996) work suggests that rising incarceration contributed to the sizeable drop in the crime rate in the 1990s. Less often noted until recently, however, are the "substantial indirect costs... associated with the current scale of imprisonment, such as the adverse societal implications of imprisoning such a large

fraction of young African American males" (Levitt 2004, p. 179). Much of the research literature in sociology is now focused on assessing the impact of such indirect costs. Although the prison may incapacitate the dangerous, at the heart of emerging lines of research is a critique of indiscriminate overincarceration and its role in fostering social inequality.

### Education and the Labor Market

Mass incarceration causes inequality in the labor market by removing potential workers, eroding the already shaky job skills of the incarcerated, and stigmatizing the formerly incarcerated (Western et al. 2002). At the aggregate level, incarceration masks inequality by artificially reducing group-specific unemployment rates among the nonincarcerated population (Western & Beckett 1999, Pager 2009). Much of the apparent narrowing of the racial gap in wages among young men in the 1990s, for example, appears to be the result of transferring low-earning African Americans from the



labor market to the prison rather than an overall improvement in African American earnings. Western (2006) estimates that racial disparities in incarceration led analysts to understate disparities in relative economic status by about 45% (pp. 98–102), concluding that the labor market expansion in the 1990s had very little effect on the prospects of young men without college educations (Western & Pettit 2005).

Those who are undereducated and ill-prepared for the labor market are more likely to end up in prison (Arum & Beattie 1999, Arum & LaFree 2008, Hirschfield 2008). Although most inmates were employed at the time of their arrest (U.S. Dep. Justice 2004), the vast majority were working in low-paying and low-quality jobs. Incarceration further reduces the employment prospects for an already vulnerable population with few job skills and low educational attainment (Pettit & Western 2004) by creating gaps in inmate employment histories. Participation in vocational and educational training while incarcerated is low and declining, so time spent in prison rarely improves these deficits (Travis & Visser 2005). Incarceration also removes inmates from the important social networks that might assist them in finding work, while simultaneously strengthening their ties to others with similarly dismal prospects (Hagan 1993). Finally, the felony conviction that accompanies incarceration carries a formidable and virtually indelible legal stigma.

Incarceration thus pushes the incarcerated out of the labor market (Freeman 1992), reduces the number of weeks worked per year (Raphael 2007), and confines former inmates to low-paying and low-status jobs. Estimates of the individual-level wage penalty of incarceration range from 10–30% (Geller et al. 2006, Pettit & Lyons 2007, Pettit & Western 2004, Waldfogel 1994, Western 2002). This prison penalty significantly exceeds that associated with arrest (Grogger 1995) or conviction (Nagin & Waldfogel 1995), although the length of incarceration does not appear to exert a strong effect on wages (Kling 2006). Moreover, the effects of incarceration on wages and earnings vary appreciably by race. Western (2006,

p. 127) estimates an aggregate lifetime earnings loss of about 1% for white men, relative to 2.1% for Latino males and 4.0% for African American males. Although this wage penalty dissipates over time, it tends to endure the longest for African American males (Pettit & Lyons 2007).

In a series of experimental audit studies, Pager (2003, 2009) has demonstrated significant labor market discrimination against ex-inmates. As with research on wage penalties, her results also reveal a greater penalty of incarceration for African American ex-inmates relative to white ex-inmates. In her Milwaukee audit study (Pager 2003), approximately 34% of white testers without criminal records received callbacks from employers, relative to 17% of white testers with records. For African Americans, however, the corresponding percentages were only 14% and 5%.

Although the labor market consequences of a felony conviction are now well-established (see also Stoll & Bushway 2008), the remedy for such consequences is far from clear. African Americans appear to suffer more from a felony conviction (Pager 2009, Pager & Quillian 2005), and the combined effects of racial discrimination and discrimination on the basis of a criminal record can all but disqualify African American men with criminal records from employment. One strategy for reducing these inequalities involves limiting employer access to criminal history information, although some caution that African Americans without criminal records might be worse off under such “ban the box” provisions. In the absence of conviction information, this argument goes, they may be subject to greater statistical discrimination by employers who make assumptions about criminality based on racial characteristics (Blumstein & Nakamura 2009, Freeman 2008, Pager 2009). To date, however, such hypotheses remain untested.

What accounts for the employment consequences of incarceration? Pager (2009) offers multiple interpretations for the low wages and high unemployment among former inmates: selection (those who go to prison would not

find work even in the absence of incarceration), transformation (prison changes inmates and makes them less employable), and reverse credentialing (prison conveys a stigma, apart from any real change on the part of inmates). There is evidence for all three mechanisms. First, in addition to very little schooling and spotty work histories, inmates also have high rates of mental illness, significant substance abuse problems, and low levels of familial and social support (U.S. Dep. Justice 2004, Uggen et al. 2005). All these characteristics may combine to make former inmates unattractive to employers, even in the absence of a felony conviction or time served. Second, in addition to the time spent away from the labor market, the values and attitudes that govern adjustment in prison are unlikely to translate well to the formal labor market (e.g., Irwin & Cressey 1962). Finally, barriers to employment are legally codified (for example, through laws barring ex-felons from working in health care) (Samuels & Mukamal 2004), with background checks ensuring that former inmates put their “worst foot forward” when applying for jobs (see Chiricos et al. 2007).

## Health

The relative paucity of research on the health effects of imprisonment is surprising in light of the significant health problems faced by inmates (Massoglia 2008a). Moreover, classic research in the sociology of health parallels the literature on the consequences of incarceration, largely anticipating the recent findings of the few studies now emerging (Massoglia 2008a,b; Schnittker & John 2007; Massoglia & Schnittker 2009). As with selection into prison, race and socioeconomic status powerfully combine to predict poor health in the general population. As with crime, race differences in health outcomes are substantially reduced (but not eliminated) when socioeconomic status is taken into account (Williams & Collins 1995, Elo 2009). As with research on the labor market consequences of a felony conviction, health outcomes are strongly influenced by racism, stress,

and stigma (Williams & Collins 1995, Williams & Mohammed 2009, Gaylord-Harden & Cunningham 2009, Schnittker & McLeod 2005).

Just as inmates bring poor work histories and educational deficits into the prison, they also bring substantial health problems and may become less healthy while doing time. The National Commission on Correctional Health Care (NCCHC) (2002) provides information on the health statuses of soon-to-be-released inmates. The results are by no means uniform. Inmates have very high rates of infectious diseases (tuberculosis, hepatitis C, HIV/AIDS) and mental illness (schizophrenia/psychosis, PTSD, anxiety) but lower rates of some chronic illnesses, such as diabetes. Among all tuberculosis patients in the United States in 1996, an estimated 35% served time in prison. The corresponding percentages for HIV/AIDS are 13% and 17%, respectively. Finally, 29% of all hepatitis C patients in 1996 served time in prison that year (NCCHC 2002, chapter 3).

Although prisoners are the only group in the United States with a constitutional right to health care, incarceration does not generally confer a long-term health benefit. Imprisonment results in short-term health improvement, but these gains dissipate over time and are wholly absent upon release (Schnittker & John 2007). And, in the few studies that have been conducted, incarceration is strongly related to later health problems (Massoglia 2008a, Schnittker & John 2007). Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the conditions and overcrowding common in today's prisons, the strongest effects are found with infectious diseases (Massoglia 2008b, Schnittker & John 2007).

The mechanisms for the incarceration-health link remain unclear, although social stigma and stress are thought to play an important role. Schnittker & John (2007), for example, argue that the stigma of prison reduces health, noting that health problems linked to incarceration appear only once prisoners are released. Massoglia (2008b) describes the effect of incarceration on health in terms of exposure (in the case of infectious diseases) and the

imposition of stress (in the case of health problems such as hypertension). Massoglia (2008a) suggests that incarceration is strongly implicated in racial disparities in health, owing to African Americans' greater aggregate prison exposure relative to whites. The health effects of incarceration are especially salient for individuals and communities with strong social ties to current and former inmates. Most inmates will be released; to the extent that prison is a locus of infectious disease, the families and neighbors of inmates are at substantial risk.

## Family

In addition to the health risks facing inmates' families, incarceration is linked to shifts in family structure, household disadvantage, and childhood mental health. Western & Wildeman (2009) have drawn explicit connections between mass incarceration and large-scale structural shifts in the family, particularly for African Americans. Well-documented trends in the feminization and juvenilization of poverty since the 1970s (Bianchi 1999, Lichter 1997) closely mirror the upsurge in incarceration. Whereas 50% of whites and Latinos are married by the age of 25, only 25% of African American women are married. The retreat from marriage, especially among women of color, has often been implicated in the concentration of poverty in single-mother families (Edin & Kefalas 2005, Ellwood & Jencks 2004, Manning & Smock 1995).

Comfort (2007) notes that although incarcerated persons are treated as "social isolates," they are in fact embedded in every facet of social life—as neighbors, as partners, and as parents (p. 20). She refers to those drawn into the legal system through the actions of others as "legal bystanders." Incarceration alters the family structures of inmates and bystanders alike by breaking up intact families (Comfort 2008, Edin et al. 2004, Western & Wildeman 2009) or by diminishing the marital prospects of ex-inmates (Edin 2000). Some evidence exists to support both processes. Fathers' rela-

tionships with their children are permanently harmed by even short periods of incarceration (Edin et al. 2004, Nurse 2004, Swisher & Waller 2008). Fathers with a history of incarceration (irrespective of when the incarceration occurred) are much less likely to be married one year after the birth of their children (Lopoo & Western 2005). Additionally, the substantial stigma of incarceration affects men's marriageability. With respect to the marriage market, Edin (2000) reports that women view formerly incarcerated men even less favorably than those with a history of chronic unemployment.

The loss of family income associated with imprisonment imposes direct economic costs, but the informal costs of maintaining a relationship with an incarcerated partner are also substantial (Comfort 2008). The loss of income is problematic for inmates as well. Debts and child support orders often continue to accrue during spells of incarceration, but the extremely low rates of pay for prison work leave inmates with little real opportunity to contribute materially to families left behind (Cancian et al. 2011). The hourly minimum wages averaged \$0.89 across the states and \$0.23 in federal prisons, with hourly maximum averaging \$2.93 and \$1.15 in state and federal prisons, respectively (Pryor 2005). Holzer and colleagues (2005) show that increased enforcement of child support orders coupled with high incarceration rates create strong work disincentives for returning inmates, especially young African American males with little education.

Studies of prison's intergenerational consequences address fundamental questions in social stratification, paralleling work in the status attainment tradition. In an article on rising incarceration rates, Hagan & Dinovitzer (1999) argue that the influence of incarceration on children "may be the least understood and most consequential implication of the high reliance on incarceration in America" (p. 122). An emerging research literature is now examining these intergenerational costs, with many hypothesizing strong negative effects (e.g., Hagan & Dinovitzer 1999, Nurse 2004, Travis et al.

2003, Uggen et al. 2005, Visher & Travis 2003, Western et al. 2002; but see Edin et al. 2004).

Most inmates are also parents. About 52% of state prison inmates and 63% of federal inmates are parents, although almost one-quarter of current inmates have three or more children (Glaze & Maruschak 2008). An estimated 2.2 million children (about 3% of the total population under 18 in the United States) currently have a parent incarcerated (Western 2006, Wildeman 2010), and the likelihood of having a parent incarcerated has increased in step with the ascent in incarceration rates (Wildeman 2010). Consistent with prison demographics, parental incarceration is especially likely to affect African American children and those with less-educated parents (Pettit & Western 2004, Western 2006, Wildeman 2010).

Although the incarceration of a parent can sometimes benefit children—as is often the case when a parent is victimizing a child—it can also harm them in many ways. It may contribute to the loss of an involved parent (Lopoo & Western 2005, Braman 2002, Hagan & Coleman 2001), push a child into the foster care system (Johnson & Waldfogel 2002), increase aggression and delinquency (Murray & Farrington 2008, Hagan & Palloni 1990, Wakefield 2007, Wildeman 2010), decrease educational attainment (Foster & Hagan 2007), and subject children to social stigma and isolation (Murray 2007, Wakefield 2009). On balance, the best evidence demonstrates a link between paternal incarceration and worsening mental and behavioral health among children (Foster & Hagan 2009, Parke & Clarke-Stewart 2003, Wakefield 2007, Wildeman 2009). There is much less evidence for maternal incarceration (and significant differences between men and women with respect to the risk of incarceration and background characteristics). Cho (2009), for example, finds little effect of maternal incarceration on school retention and performance of children (but see Foster & Hagan 2007, Huebner & Gustafson 2007, Johnson & Waldfogel 2002).

## Politics and Civic Life

In politics, as elsewhere, the effects of incarceration fall unevenly across communities. Petersilia (2003) and Clear (2007), among others, describe the spatial concentration of incarceration in predominately poor and African American communities. This concentration has brought public attention to Eric Cadora's conception of "million dollar blocks"—criminal justice expenditures in excess of \$1 million just to incarcerate the residents of single city blocks in New York (see, e.g., Gonnerman 2004). Because incarceration has reached such heights and is so concentrated in small geographic areas, researchers are beginning to document aggregate-level effects of incarceration beyond those experienced by individuals.

Incarceration may reduce crime by temporarily incapacitating would-be offenders, but it also reduces neighborhood stability by removing large numbers of young men from concentrated areas. The most destabilizing influences arise from shifts in criminal justice supervision. Incarceration is typically experienced in a series of short spells, with people cycling back and forth from neighborhood to institution (Petersilia 2003). In high-incarceration neighborhoods, as many as 15% of the adult males are cycling back and forth to prison, a process Clear (2007) describes as "coercive mobility" (p. 73). At such high levels of incarceration, Clear argues, coercive mobility reaches a threshold in which further punishment only exacerbates neighborhood crime. Housing restrictions further compound the problem of returning ex-inmates. Beckett & Herbert (2008, 2010) document a new form of banishment, in the form of contemporary applications of trespass law, off-limits orders, spatial exclusion from parks and other areas, and similar housing and public order restrictions.

In addition to altering neighborhood social and civic life, incarceration and felony convictions bar former felons from a host of other opportunities for civic engagement. About 1 in 40 adults, most of whom are not serving time in prison, are unable to vote as a result of a

felony conviction (about 5.4 million Americans) (Manza & Uggen 2006). In some states, as many as 1 in 4 African American men are disenfranchised because of a felony conviction. The influence has been profound; disenfranchisement of current and former felons has altered the outcome of numerous national elections, most notably the 2000 presidential race (Manza & Uggen 2006). Other legal restrictions on felons reshape the administration of justice. Owing to racial disparities in convictions, for example, African Americans are less likely than whites to qualify for jury service, and African American defendants are correspondingly less likely to be judged by a jury of their peers (Wheelock 2006).

### Could Prison Reduce Inequality?

Imprisonment powerfully transforms the lives of those who serve time. The mechanisms described thus far highlight its capacity to create and reinforce inequality, but it also has the power to address human capital and health deficits and to improve prospects for inmates and the communities to which they return. People arrive at prison with significant economic and social disadvantages. Relative to the general population, prison inmates are much more likely to be unemployed or out of the labor market altogether. Although almost 90% of adults in the general population achieve a high school diploma or equivalency, little more than a third of inmates do so. Prison inmates also have higher rates of significant health problems, substance abuse histories, learning disabilities, and mental illnesses (see NCCHC 2002, U.S. Dep. Justice 2004, Uggen et al. 2005).

Spells in prison might be more productively used to obtain a high school diploma, an advanced degree, or vocational skills or to address continuing health concerns. Imprisonment may also have salutary effects on the neighborhoods from which inmates are removed (Petersilia 2003), may have direct benefits to the families of criminally involved men (Comfort 2008), and may even contribute to short-term earnings gains for some inmates (Kling 2006).

Unfortunately, although prisons might indeed do all of these things, there is little evidence they are making good on such promises, especially in the current mass incarceration era. Participation in prison educational and vocational programs is low and declining, due in part to capacity constraints (Travis & Visser 2005, Petersilia 2005). The recent history of punishment has been one of simultaneously scaling up sentence length and scaling back programs that might assist reentering inmates (see, e.g., Page 2004 on the decline of educational benefits for felons). Although the past decade brought a renewed focus on the work, family, and housing challenges facing reentering prisoners, scholarship on interventions to overcome these challenges is only now emerging (Petersilia 2003, Travis 2005).

With stronger links between incarceration and stratification now forged in the research literature, the current period offers significant opportunities for research and program development. While incarceration rates continue to increase, the outsized year-over-year growth of the 1990s has now slowed significantly, especially in high incarceration states such as California, Arizona, and Texas. Moreover, the recessionary crisis of 2008 and 2009 has compounded long-standing capacity problems in the criminal justice system. As states struggle with budgetary constraints and overcrowding, the costs of mass imprisonment are difficult to ignore. If states choose to cut the few programs aiding current or reentering prisoners, increasing inequalities are likely to result. Alternatively, inequality may be reduced if resources are reallocated in ways that simultaneously reduce prison populations while improving opportunities for current and former inmates.

### EXTRAVAGANT CLAIMS ABOUT INCARCERATION AND INEQUALITY

Scholarship in the sociology of punishment, criminology, and social stratification offers both theory and evidence linking racialized mass

incarceration to more inequality, worsening neighborhoods, declining civic engagement, employment problems, and family harm. Even as he offers the most powerful evidence to date, however, Western (2006) acknowledges it is an “extravagant claim” to draw such a close connection between incarceration and the American social stratification system (p. 11). It is an extravagant claim, one more easily made than convincingly demonstrated.

Does imprisonment reflect societal disadvantage or cause it? Sociological research on inequality and mass incarceration clearly shows both processes at work. The most disadvantaged and vulnerable are surely more likely to end up in prison. Increasingly, however, sociologists argue that crime and punishment cause future disadvantage, playing a pivotal role in the individual transition to adult roles (Laub & Sampson 2003, Massoglia & Uggen 2010, Western 2006) and in the larger stratification system. Conventional wisdom to the contrary, we can no longer think of prisoners as isolated loners or of the prison as isolated from other social structures. Yet, although the studies described here offer sophisticated and compelling evidence on prisons and inequality, firm causal inferences remain elusive in this line of scholarship.

Ethical and practical considerations generally preclude random assignment to prison versus other interventions, and scholars interpret similar empirical findings in radically different ways. For example, several studies demonstrate higher recidivism rates for those sentenced to prison relative to community sanctions (see Clear 2007 for a lengthy discussion). Is this evidence of the deleterious effects of imprisonment or confirmation that prisons reliably select the most crime-prone? The research reviewed here, based on both observational and experimental methods, represents a considerable leap forward. Nevertheless, although considerable progress has been made documenting the average effect of imprisonment on, say, wages or children’s mental health, we still know very little about the heterogeneity of experiences and effects across social groups.

Research is needed to further refine the prison experience, accounting for differential effects across security levels, length and conditions of confinement, and differences in reentry experiences. Similarly, while much research on the collateral consequences of incarceration is motivated by life course or developmental theory, relatively few studies have tested for age interactions (Uggen 2000, Uggen et al. 2005). Such work is needed because many of the enduring barriers facing reentering prisoners fly in the face of theory and research on desistance from crime (Laub & Sampson 2003). Despite the steep and well-documented decline in crime with age, the stigma of incarceration follows former inmates long after they have left crime. Finally, although scholars continually highlight the problems of reentry, few studies adequately and systematically link the conditions of confinement to successful readjustment upon release. More research applying experimental and sophisticated matching techniques is needed to understand the long-term postrelease effects of interventions for inmates, such as cognitive-behavioral therapies and life skills training (see, e.g., MacKenzie 2007).

Beyond the methodological difficulties described above, concerns about inequality must be placed alongside those of public safety, economic costs, and the interests of victims. We do not suggest that prisons do not have incapacitative effects that enhance public safety or that criminal punishment serves no societal function. Imprisonment, at some level, reflects societal values and responds to social harms. Where might the entrenchment of inequality rank among these societal harms? The field has yet to articulate a compelling rebuttal to the punitive punishment strategy that has dominated for decades. Although incarceration on a mass scale surely reduces crime, it is an increasingly inefficient method of doing so. It also imposes marked and observable social costs, chief among them the deepening of social inequalities.

By incapacitating millions of citizens, mass incarceration appears to have played some role in reducing U.S. crime rates, at least in the

short term. Nevertheless, this review shows considerable short- and long-term costs to this strategy, especially with regard to social inequality. Beyond the potentially criminogenic consequences of mass incarceration, the racialized character of incarceration threatens the legitimacy of the entire system (Bobo &

Thompson 2006). To the extent that incarceration effects were ever confined to a small and dangerous group of persistent criminals, the research detailed here suggests this is no longer the case. Instead, the prison has emerged as a powerful and often invisible institution that drives and shapes social inequality.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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