

Cycles of Support: The Association of Incarceration and Household Instability

Kevin Dahaghi

Department of Sociology and Population Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin

INTRODUCTION

Household insecurity is an important indicator of disadvantage that reflects the lived experiences of a growing proportion of American families, with stark implications for the social and economic wellbeing of individuals and families (Raley et al. 2018; Lopoo and London 2016; Cherlin 2010). The rapid expansion of the American criminal justice system has led more families and children to experience the incarceration of a household member. This is especially prevalent among poor people and people of color, who are disproportionately represented in the American criminal justice system (Wildeman 2009). The consequences of incarceration extend to entire households, which are shown to experience diminished incomes (Turney and Schneider 2016; Geller et al. 2011), family instability (Wakefield et al. 2016; Cancian et al. 2016), and higher likelihoods of future criminal justice involvement (Haskins 2016).

Studies on incarceration and households have examined how paternal incarceration contributes to worsened household economic wellbeing (Geller and Franklin 2014; Geller et al. 2011). Although economic disadvantage often precedes incarceration, household incarceration can worsen, reproduce, and generate added hardships (Western et al. 2015; Lee et al. 2014). Incarceration is consequential for household and family dynamics by contributing to family instability. Research shows that incarceration is strongly associated with union dissolution, stress proliferation, and stigmatization (Comfort 2007). Although much of the literature on this topic has centered on romantic partners and children, there is reason to suggest that these consequences spread to household members more broadly. The trauma of incarceration can transmit throughout household networks, affecting siblings, grandparents, cousins, and non-relatives. For example, ethnographic work documents how the trauma of seeing elders arrested and incarcerated can affect young people throughout communities, not just immediate family members (Comfort 2007).

Less is known about whether and how these households respond to potential instability and hardship. Few studies have directly examined associations between household member incarceration and household composition, and among studies that have, paternal incarceration is often the primary focus (Western and Smith 2018; Bryan 2017; Wakefield et al. 2016). This study seeks to investigate the broader social and economic consequences of having an incarcerated household member, beyond parental incarceration (Lee et al. 2015).

In this study, I contribute to research on criminal justice involvement and households by examining household instability and insecurity after incarceration. I use unique data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), a nationally-representative, longitudinal household survey of the non-institutionalized population that includes detailed information on indicators of household and individual social and economic wellbeing. I examine household composition and stability after the incarceration of a household member. Using a detailed sample of individuals recently released from incarceration, these analyses also address heterogeneity in these associations. Given the high prevalence of incarceration and its negative implications for families and children (Bryan 2017; Wakefield et al. 2016), exploring these associations has potential to broaden understandings on the ways in which mass incarceration transmits inter- and intra-generational disadvantage across households and family members.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

In the context of high incarceration rates, households may respond differently to potential insecurity (Western et al. 2015; Geller and Franklin 2014). While studies have examined the spillover

consequences of parental incarceration, few have explored how the incarceration of other household members is impactful. This is an important omission because it may provide key insights on the broader scope of collateral consequences and the heterogeneity of these effects within households. The current study will advance the literature on incarceration and households by: 1) providing estimates on the associations of incarceration and two dimensions of household structure, 2) examining how incarceration affects extended kin, and 3) exploring mechanisms that link incarceration to household structure. Specifically, I address the following four research questions:

1. What is the prevalence of household incarceration among extended kin?
2. What is the association of household member incarceration and household instability?
3. To what extent is household incarceration associated with a risk of housing insecurity?
4. Are there racial, class, and gender differences in these associations?

Examining the consequences of incarceration is made difficult by inconsistencies in available data on institutionalized populations, namely those involved with the criminal justice system. When compared with official statistics, national household survey data often exclude or underreport on institutionalized populations (Sykes and Maroto 2016). Pettit (2012) argues that the exclusion of institutionalized populations, primarily penal populations, misrepresents the extent of racial and socioeconomic inequality in various domains of social and economic life, such as employment and political participation. Researchers have proposed various methodological solutions, such as merging multiple data sources, developing new survey weights, and designing surveys to specifically study the formerly incarcerated (Sykes and Maroto 2016; Western et al. 2015).

RESEARCH DESIGN

Data. To examine associations between household member incarceration and household instability and insecurity, I will use data from Wave 1 and Wave 2 of the 2014 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP). SIPP is a longitudinal survey of a nationally-representative panel of the non-institutionalized population. Administered by the U.S. Census Bureau annually over a four-year period, SIPP is designed to collect information on the short-term dynamics of household composition, income, and eligibility and participation in government assistance programs. SIPP is the only nationally-representative data source to include full information on how respondents are related to all other household members (Brown et al. 2016). Traditional household rosters only provide information on relationships between household heads and others. The 2014 SIPP re-design provides detailed information on relationships, such as step-siblings and half-siblings, that better distinguish the relationship dynamics in households. To date, SIPP data have not been used to examine dynamics of criminal justice involvement due to a lack of indicators on criminal justice contact. Using internal data from household rosters, I can identify household members who were incarcerated at some point during the reference year¹.

Measures. My primary dependent variable, *household instability*, is a binary measure which indicates 1) whether the respondent lives in a household that is doubled up and 2) the average number of moves. A household is coded as 1 if it contains either three generations of household members or contains a non-child relative or any non-relative age 18 or older.

My primary independent variable is *household incarceration*, which is measured based on flags indicating whether the respondent was incarcerated at any point during the 2013 reference year. Public data from SIPP do not include measures of criminal justice contact; however, internal

The author is awaiting approval of Special Sworn Status needed to access restricted data.¹

data reveal periods of incarceration during the reference year. This measure of incarceration is limited to people who re-entered households upon release, and therefore is not entirely representative of the incarcerated population (Monte 2018). Given that respondents returned to the household within the reference year, this measure captures recent incarceration spells.

Households of incarcerated individuals are expected to differ from other households on factors that influence the outcomes of interest (Turney and Schneider 2016). I adjust for a set of individual-level and household-level covariates related to the association of incarceration and household outcomes. These variables include: age, sex, race, nativity, educational attainment, employment, marital status, multiple partner fertility, single-parent household, urban residence, average household income and assets, and receipt of public assistance.

Analytic Strategy. The first step in the analysis is to descriptively show the levels of housing instability and hardship among all respondents, and then separately for households with incarcerated members. The second step is to estimate a series of ordinary least squares (OLS) and logistic regression models on the associations of household incarceration and housing instability and hardship. The third step is to examine several mechanisms through which incarceration is associated with housing instability and hardship. In all stages of the analysis, I will use sample weights provided by the U.S. Census Bureau to more precisely estimate standard errors and significance. In doing so, I will provide robust estimates of household composition and insecurity among households of incarcerated members.

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