



Paternal Incarceration and Child Homelessness

Background

Since the 1980s two demographic groups, African Americans and children, have grown rapidly among the US homeless population. Little is known about the causes of these compositional shifts but there is some reason to suggest that the prison boom – the dramatic increase in incarceration rates over the same time period – may have played an important part. Previous research has demonstrated that the risk of having a parent imprisoned is much higher for black children than for white children and that the risk of homelessness among fathers is greater among those with a history of incarceration. However, because paternal incarceration often leads to severed ties with partners and children and few children experience homelessness while living with a previously imprisoned father, it is more likely that paternal incarceration affects child homelessness indirectly by reducing resources available to mothers and children.

This brief contributes to our knowledge of the challenges faced by children with incarcerated fathers by examining the effect of paternal incarceration on child homelessness. Specifically, it explores three mechanisms by which father incarceration may lead to child homelessness, including weakening family finances, limiting children's access to institutional and informal supports, and reducing mothers' capacities and capabilities. It also examines the extent to which this relationship is concentrated among black children and tests concerns of spuriousness, the possibility that both incarceration and homelessness are results of a third factor such as domestic violence or substance abuse. Evidence for a causal relationship would imply that the

prison boom may have contributed to recent rises in child homelessness.

Data and Methods

Data come from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study, which follows a cohort of nearly 5,000 couples with children born between 1998 and 2000. Couples were sampled from births in 75 hospitals in 20 large US cities. Unmarried couples were oversampled, resulting in high levels of social and economic disadvantage, including low levels of income and education and a large amount (40%) of formerly incarcerated fathers. Follow-up interviews took place one, three, and five years after the birth of the focal child. Analyses are limited to children who had at least one parent complete both the three-year and five-year interviews ($n = 3,774$).

The focal child is considered homeless at age five if either parent claiming to live with the child all or most of the time also reports living in a shelter/temporary housing or on the street at the time of the interview, or reports having stayed somewhere not intended for regular housing (e.g., abandoned building, car) for at least one night in the year before the interview. The father is classified as recently incarcerated if he or the child's mother reports that he was incarcerated at the time of, or at any point in the two years before the five-year interview but was not incarcerated at year three. A measure of ever being incarcerated by year three based on mother and father reports is also included.

To test the mechanisms of the relationship, mediating variables measure family finance, formal and informal

support, and mothers' capacities and capabilities. Measures of family finance are measured at year five and include the following: having a resident father, household income to poverty ratio, caregiver's inability to pay bills, the number of moves in the past two years, and past year eviction. Measures of children's supports include the caregiver's lack of social support, loss of public housing, loss of housing subsidy, and loss of cash welfare. Measures of maternal capacities and capabilities, measured at year five, include mothers' depression, stress, and life dissatisfaction. Spuriousness is tested by accounting for father's recent domestic abuse and whether either parent had a drug or alcohol problem. Finally, other demographic and socioeconomic characteristics are included as controls.¹

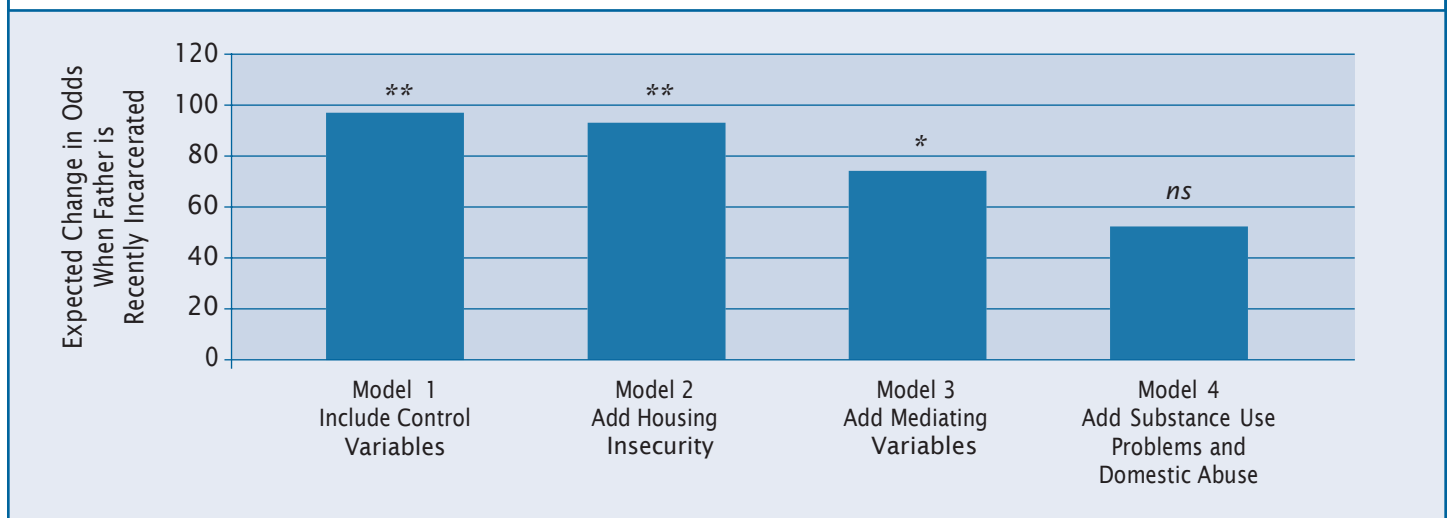
Logistic regression models are used for the analysis. The first two models test the relationship between recent incarceration and risk of child homelessness while controlling for socioeconomic and demographic characteristics including prior housing insecurity. The third model

examines the role of the mediating variables, and the fourth model adjusts for spuriousness. An interaction between father incarceration and whether the child is black is also included to test how concentrated the results are among black children.

Results

Results of the logistic regression models are summarized in the following figures. In Figure 1, results in Model 1 indicate that father incarceration is associated with a strong and significant increase in the risk of child homelessness while adjusting for socioeconomic characteristics. Results in Model 2 show that this relationship still holds when adjusting for prior housing insecurity. Using the results in Model 2 as a starting point, findings in Model 3 suggest that family finances, social and institutional support, and mothers' capabilities mediate a portion of the paternal incarceration-child homelessness relationship. Model 4 includes these mediators and tests for spuriousness by

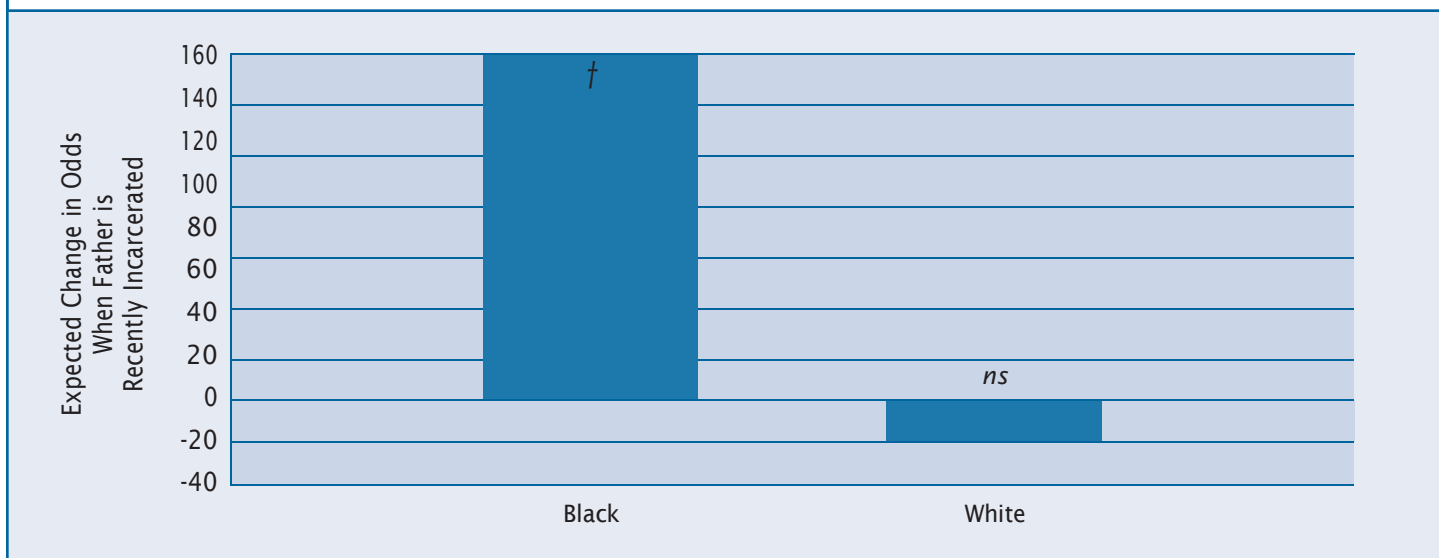
Figure 1: Expected Percent Change in Odds of Homelessness for Children with a Recently Incarcerated Father



* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed); ns = not significant

¹ Control variables include recent and prior maternal incarceration, mother and father age, mother and father high school dropout, child's race/ethnicity, number of other children mother had before focal child, primary caregiver immigrant status, mother's prenatal smoking, and the following at year 3: homelessness, number of moves in two years, evicted in last year, either parent's drug/alcohol problem, domestic abuse, resident father, household income/poverty ratio, caregiver's self-rated health, inability to pay bills, lack of social support, living in public housing, receipt of housing subsidy and cash welfare, as well as maternal depression, life dissatisfaction, and stress.

Figure 2: Expected Percent Change in Odds of Homelessness for Children with a Recently Incarcerated Father, by Race



† $p < .10$; ns = not significant

adding measures of substance use problems and fathers’ domestic abuse, yielding a nonsignificant coefficient for fathers’ recent incarceration.

To test whether these results are concentrated among black children, Figure 2 examines an interaction between recent paternal incarceration and whether the child was black. Results suggest that on average, paternal incarceration is expected to significantly increase the risk of child homelessness among black children (144% increase in odds) but not among white children.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Findings suggest that the magnitude of the effect of paternal incarceration on risk of child homelessness is substantial. This relationship can in part (about 15% after testing for spuriousness) be explained by weakened family finances, a lack of social and instrumental support, and maternal capacities and capabilities. These mechanisms might have explained more of the relationship if they had

been measured over a longer period of time. Future research should examine the role of other potential mediators such as increased costs due to legal fees and maintaining contact with the father.

Findings further suggest that the effects of paternal incarceration on child homelessness are concentrated among black children. This implies that rises in the proportion of the homeless population comprised of black children may have been spurred by the prison boom not only because black children have a greater likelihood of having a parent imprisoned, but also because they are more likely to become homeless due to paternal imprisonment. Future research should examine why black children are disproportionately more likely to experience homelessness following the incarceration of a father. Policymakers should consider alternative methods of corrections, or should direct policy toward the prevention of housing insecurity for children of incarcerated fathers by seeking to stabilize family finances and provide housing, mental health, and other services for mothers and children.

FRAGILE FAMILIES RESEARCH BRIEF

Center for Research on Child Wellbeing

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“Employment, Work-Family Conflict, and Parenting Stress among Economically Disadvantaged Fathers”

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For more information about the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, go to <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu>. To review public and working papers from the Fragile Families Study, go to <http://crcw.princeton.edu/publications/publications.asp>.

This research brief was adapted from “Parental Incarceration, Child Homelessness, and the Invisible Consequences of Mass Imprisonment” by Christopher Wildeman (forthcoming in the ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science).

A Publication of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University.