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# Collateral Consequences of Imprisonment for Children, Communities, and Prisoners

## ABSTRACT

Analyses of the effects of America's experiment with vastly increased use of imprisonment as a penal sanction typically focus on crime reduction and public spending. Little attention has been paid to collateral effects. Imprisonment significantly reduces later employment rates and incomes of ex-prisoners. In many urban communities, large fractions of young men attain prison records and are thus made less able to contribute to their communities and families. Less is known about the effects of a parent's imprisonment on children's development, though mainstream theories provide grounds for predicting those effects are substantial and deleterious. Until research begins to shed light on these questions, penal policy will continue to be set in ignorance of important ramifications of alternate policy options.

We are at a crossing point in American crime and punishment: rates of imprisonment are increasing at the same time that rates of crime are decreasing. Some argue this is exactly as it should be, and that increased investment in prisons is being repaid in benefits of reduced crime. Yet if this is so, the benefits of imprisonment are less certain and slower in arriving than expected, and few may realize the full extent of the costs. This last possibility seems especially likely when we take into account collateral costs and consequences of imprisonment that may be especially consequential for children of imprisoned parents who are already at risk as a result of growing up and coming of age in disadvantaged communities.

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The collateral costs of imprisonment may be extensive. The most obvious concern is that the effects of imprisonment damage the human and social capital of those who are incarcerated, their families, and their communities, including the detrimental impact of imprisoning parents on their children. Less obvious concerns involve foregone opportunities to invest in schools and the selective direction of existing and new resources away from minority to majority group communities where prisons are being built and operated. More specifically, imprisonment may engender negative consequences for offenders whose employment prospects after release are diminished; for families who suffer losses both emotional and financial; for children who suffer emotional and behavioral problems due to the loss of a parent, financial strain, and possible displacement into the care of others; for communities whose stability is threatened due to the loss of working males; and for other social institutions that are affected by the budgetary constraints imposed by the increases in spending on incarceration.

This essay considers this collection of costs. It begins and ends with a consideration of the impact of the imprisonment of parents on children, noting that this may be the least understood and most consequential implication of the high reliance on incarceration in America. Because we are concerned that the impact on children is the most serious result of the growing reliance on imprisonment, we begin in Section I by first outlining theoretical perspectives that can inform our understanding of the effects of parental incarceration on children. In Section II, we briefly survey the extent of incarceration, the costs of corrections, and the implications of this spending for other sectors of the economy. In Section III, the consequences of incarceration in terms of human and social capital are considered and the implications for work and families, and the effects thus far observed in research on the children of incarcerated parents. A particular goal of the essay is to stimulate more systematic research on this last topic, and to this end the essay concludes in Section IV with specific proposals for how research on children of imprisoned parents can be carried out most effectively. This research is needed to assess more systematically the losses in human and social capital that the largest and most racially concentrated imprisonment in the history of this country is having on a future generation of children. Until this research is undertaken in a serious and systematic way, the potential impact of the incarceration of parents on children will remain an unrecognized and therefore neglected con-

sideration in the policy framework that surrounds the increased reliance on imprisonment in America.

### I. Theoretical Background of Parenting and Prison Research

There obviously are cases involving the incarceration of negligent, violent, and abusive parents where the imprisonment of the parents benefits children by removing serious risks of current and future harm. But how often is this the case? How often and to what extent is parental imprisonment beneficial or detrimental to children? The imprisonment of parents may more often be a traumatic life event that initiates or intensifies rather than reduces the problems of the involved children. Thus even in problem-plagued families the incarceration of a parent may only add to the difficulties faced by children. Imprisonment of a parent can alter the prospects of the family in a number of significant ways that are anticipated in the literature on single parenthood (see McLanahan and Sandefur 1994), with the trauma of parental imprisonment having possible economic and socioemotional ramifications.

Removal of one parent from participation in a child's life can have severe implications for the child's social capital—the resources that can be drawn on to facilitate relationships and initiatives, “making possible the achievement of certain ends” (Coleman 1990, p. 302). Portes (1998, p. 6) defines social capital in terms of “the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures.” The effects of diminished social capital can be observed in the loss of its functions. For example, the loss of social capital can be recognized in the ways in which disruptions in families are dysfunctional for children. Associated sociological and criminological theories point to three prominent ways in which the effects of parental imprisonment on the social capital of children might be understood. These involve the strains of economic deprivation, the loss of parental socialization through role modeling, support, and supervision, and the stigma and shame of societal labeling. For ease of reference, we call these the *strain*, *socialization*, and *stigmatization* perspectives.

As formulated, these perspectives all involve assumptions about the ways in which parental adversity can deplete the human and social capital resources of the family. However, we also consider below an alternative version of the strain perspective that adopts the assumption that

the imprisoned parent poses a drain or threat to the human and social capital of the family. And we also introduce a selection perspective that considers predisposing processes that may lead children to follow imprisoned parents into crime and result in other threats to their social well-being. As noted at the outset of this section and in the alternative version of the strain perspective outlined below, if these selection processes are sufficiently problematic, they might be mitigated by the removal of troublesome parents. However, we hypothesize that imprisonment more often intensifies the problems caused by a dysfunctional parent. Knowing if and when either of these possible outcomes is the case is obviously important for policy as well as for theoretical reasons, and can only be determined through the kinds of research reviewed and proposed in later sections of this essay.

#### *A. The Strain Perspective*

If a subsequently imprisoned parent previously contributes positively to the family, the imprisonment of that parent may result in economic deprivation and resulting strains that affect children. Positive contributions by a subsequently imprisoned parent may not always have involved the parents maintaining an intact household. Many nonresident parents, even many never-married and absent parents, maintain frequent contact with their children, and much of the variation in the nature of the parental contribution may have to do with the form and quality of family relationships rather than with the legal and residential nature of the relationship. The quantity and quality of these relationships need to be measured directly.

Direct effects of economic deprivation on children are emphasized in the classical opportunity and strain theories of crime and deviance (Merton 1938; Cloward and Ohlin 1960; Messner and Rosenfeld 1993). The effects of economic deprivation can be indirect as well as direct, involving not only the loss of income-related opportunities that the imprisoned parent may have provided, but also the input that parent may have made to family life more generally (McLanahan and Bumpass 1988).

In terms of human and social capital, remaining single parents simply may have less money and time to invest in their children (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). In turn, older children may have to assume unexpected role responsibilities, for example, caring for younger children, and they may also be diverted from school and into early or unplanned labor force participation in order to reduce demands on or to

supplement household income. Alternatively, these youth may be pushed toward the underground economy and its criminal activities, or toward early marriage and parenthood as means of escaping the disrupted family of origin (Hagan and Wheaton 1993).

However, it must also be acknowledged that there is an alternative possible strain theory of the effects of parental imprisonment on children, and this theory makes opposite predictions from the perspective just noted. This version of strain theory begins from the awareness that imprisonment is sometimes a means by which families encourage the court to remove a parent who has “burned through” the supportive capacity of the family, often as a result of idleness or negligence, and sometimes through violence and abuse (see Simon 1993). Such a parent is a drain or threat rather than an asset to the family.

This second version of strain theory is quite different from the first in that imprisonment is seen as a potential source of relief from difficulties associated with the removed parent. This version of strain theory underlines the importance of knowing the prior relationship between an offender and his family that predates imprisonment. It is possible that both versions of strain theory operate, and that in the aggregate they cancel one another’s effects. However, we hypothesize that it is more likely imprisonment is harmful to children even in dysfunctional families, because imprisonment will more often compound than mitigate preexisting family problems. Furthermore, once the parent is removed from the household, the quality of the alternative care arrangements for the children may be inadequate, further compounding the trauma of separation. This possibility is developed further in the discussion of the socialization and stigmatization perspectives that follow.

### *B. The Socialization Perspective*

Again assuming the imprisoned parent previously contributed positively to the life of the family, imprisonment can deprive the family of an important resource for the socialization of the child. Sociological and criminological theories commonly emphasize the importance of parental supervision, role models, and support in the childhood socialization process. This perspective is reflected most prominently in control theories of crime and deviance. The most prominent version of control theory maintains that even parents and siblings who are oriented to criminal activities can often steer younger family members in prosocial directions (Hirschi 1969). The most important contemporary application of control theory in the study of crime is the longitudinal

research of Sampson and Laub (1993), which emphasizes that the social control of children by parents is an important source of social capital that persists in its influence throughout the life course (also Hagan and Parker 1997).

The loss of a parent from the family can influence children in a variety of ways. The impact may involve not only the loss of the supervision, support, and role model of the absent parent, but also the increased salience of the remaining parent, for example, as a model of single parenthood, and through a strengthening of the role of peers (McLanahan and Bumpass 1988). Control and socialization theories tend to see children as situated in a struggle of allegiances between family and peers, with the absence of a parent shifting the balance of this struggle in favor of antisocial peers. That the parent is absent for crime-related reasons may reasonably intensify this concern although, as noted above, it remains an unresolved question how different kinds of criminal parents actually influence their children.

### *C. The Stigmatization Perspective*

Criminologists have paid particular attention to the theoretical implications of imprisonment as a form of stigma that attaches to individuals and the groups to which they belong, in this case including most notably their families. The stigma of criminalization is another source of the depletion of the social capital of children (Hagan and Palloni 1990; Hagan 1991). Braithwaite (1989) draws an important distinction between the kind of stigma imposed by imprisonment and alternative processes of “reintegrative shaming.” While the stigma of imprisonment is intended to result in exclusion from the social group, reintegrative shaming includes rituals of reacceptance and reabsorption that are designed to encourage resumption of life in the group. Well-functioning families are prominent sites of reintegrative shaming, but Braithwaite’s point is that this kind of response to antisocial behaviors can be adopted in broader societal settings as well.

Historically, the development of probation and parole was intended to offer the prospect of reintegration to criminal offenders as alternatives to the stigma of imprisonment (Rothman 1980); but this use of probation and parole is less common today than it was in the past (Simon 1993). In the absence of efforts to encourage reacceptance and reabsorption, the stigma of imprisonment risks not only making parents into outlaws, but their children as well. The processes by which this may occur are only beginning to be understood.

Scheff and Retzinger (1991) suggest that the kind of stigmatization experience that Braithwaite associates with imprisonment can cause angry and defiant responses involving feelings of unacknowledged shame and rejection. These feelings and responses to stigmatization may affect not only the parents who are imprisoned, but also their children. Scheff writes of such experiences that “when there is a real and/or imagined rejection . . . the deference-emotion system may show a malign form, a chain reaction of shame and anger” (Scheff 1988, p. 397).

Scheff and Retzinger go on to note that schools, parents, employers, and fellow citizens increasingly recognize large numbers of highly “touchy,” angry young people ready to punish any available target in response to perceived insults of the past, which may include the stigmatization experienced as children of incarcerated parents (1991, p. 65). In developing a defiance theory of criminal sanctions, Sherman suggests that “a great deal of evidence suggests that the best name for this proud and angry emotion—and the retaliation it causes against vicarious victims—is defiance” (1993, p. 459).

The emotions that can surround a traumatic experience such as the imprisonment of a parent can be linked into sequential analyses of stressful life events and turning points and transitions in the life course (Hagan and McCarthy 1997*a*, 1997*b*). From this perspective, the imprisonment of a parent represents one kind of event that can combine with other adverse life experiences in influencing longer-term life outcomes. For example, Rutter discusses chains of adversity in the life cycle (see also Caspi and Elder 1988) and suggests that “the impact of some factor in childhood may lie less in the immediate behavioral change it brings about than in the fact that it sets in motion a chain reaction in which one ‘bad’ thing leads to another” (Rutter 1989, p. 27). Rutter further observes that “antisocial behavior . . . will influence later environments through the societal responses it induces—such as custodial or correctional actions that may serve both to ‘label’ and to strengthen antisocial peer group influences” (1989, p. 42).

Peggy Thoits similarly points to multiplicative processes that can compound additive effects of stressful life events. She observes that “a person who has experienced one event may react with even more distress to a second . . . ; to the person, life might seem to be spiraling out of control. This would produce [an] . . . interaction between event occurrences; two or more events would result in more distress than would be expected from the simple sum of their singular effects”



(Thoits 1983, p. 69). Thoits goes on to describe a vulnerability model in which early stressful events set the foundation for adverse reactions to subsequent events. In this model, “predispositions are remote, enduring physiological and psychological characteristics that . . . enhance . . . the impacts of current life experiences” (1983, p. 80). The stigma of having a parent incarcerated is a likely candidate for inclusion in such a vulnerability model.

#### *D. The Selection Perspective*

Finally, it is crucial that the above perspectives be assessed in relation to what we have called the selection perspective. This perspective assumes that imprisoned parents and their children are already different from parents and their children who are not imprisoned, prior to the imposition of a prison sentence. The likelihood that this is the case is reflected in the commission of and conviction for the crime that leads to incarceration.

Note that differences that predate parental incarceration may derive from a mixture of genetic and social factors that accumulate up to the point of parental imprisonment. These factors may include patterns of negligence, violence, and abuse noted in the alternative version of strain theory discussed above. It is crucial that these predetermining differences be taken into account in assessing effects of parental imprisonment. As noted at earlier points in our discussion, these predetermining differences may often interact with responses to them, such as imprisonment. It is fair to say that we know little about the additive or multiplicative ways in which parental imprisonment may be causally linked to changes in the well-being of children. We lack full answers even to the basic question whether in the aggregate the children of imprisoned parents are less well off than children of parents who do not experience imprisonment.

Assuming an absence of good answers, we should ask: Are the children of imprisoned children also less well off than children of parents who do not experience imprisonment and who have similar background characteristics, including prior family relationships, race, gender, income, and education? And if so, would children of imprisoned parents do better if their parents were given a noncustodial sentence? Finally, can we further specify kinds of children and circumstances that combine with imprisonment to produce the most and least harmful effects on children? In particular, it is likely important to know whether the consequences of incarcerating mothers and fathers differ, and

whether this varies according to the sole or combined role they play in supporting and caring for their children. These questions become progressively more challenging to answer, yet they are questions that judges regularly encounter in making sentencing decisions involving parents.

We have now introduced the major theoretical perspectives that can inform our thinking about the effects of imprisoning parents on children. These effects occur within the larger context of the extent to which imprisonment is used as a criminal sanction. Before further considering the effects of imprisonment it is important to establish just how extensive our reliance on incarceration has become in the United States, and how its effects may be felt outside as well as inside the family.

## II. Calculating Costs and Consequences

From the outset we must acknowledge that it is a challenging task to establish exact trends in American imprisonment for use as a baseline in assessing the collateral consequences of incarceration. Most developed countries have more centralized systems of imprisonment than the United States. In the United States less serious and unconvicted offenders frequently are kept in local jails, making it difficult to be sure just how many Americans are incarcerated at any given time.

Despite this difficulty, the Bureau of Justice Statistics offers a regular report of the number of prisoners under the jurisdiction of federal or state correctional authorities. These data indicate that at year-end 1997, the U.S. incarceration rate was 645 persons in jail or prison per 100,000 residents (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1998*b*). Cross-national comparisons reveal that U.S. incarceration rates are far higher than those of other industrial democracies, whose rates are in the range of 55–130 per 100,000 of population (Mauer 1997). Moreover, the U.S. rate of incarceration has grown at a decade long rate of about 7 percent a year, more than doubling the 1985 figure of 744,208, so that in 1997 there were about 1.7 million Americans in jail and prison (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1997, 1998*b*). At this rate of growth, the American incarcerated population will easily exceed two million by the millennium.

Incarceration rates have not varied in clear or close connection to crime rates. Although the consensus of criminologists is that less serious crimes such as theft and burglary are difficult if not impossible to count accurately, there nonetheless is some evidence from the National Crime Victimization Survey that theft and burglary began to de-

crease in the late 1970s, about five years after imprisonment rates started their sharp ascent; police statistics indicate that property crimes actually increased during these years (Maguire and Pastore 1997; Rand, Lynch, and Cantor 1997). Meanwhile, the victim survey data indicate that more serious violent crimes, which presumably are more accurately reported, started to decline in the early 1980s, rose again after 1986, and did not start to clearly decline again until the early to middle 1990s, about twenty years after the spike upward in imprisonment; police data on violent victimization indicate a fairly similar pattern. Divergence between crime rates and incarceration rates is indicated by several studies based on official data and survey data (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1998*a*; see also Lynch and Sabol 1997).

It is estimated that the cost of corrections in the U.S. is now about \$32 billion a year (Maguire and Pastore 1997). So if there is a deterrent or incapacitative effect of incarceration in America, it is a product of a huge and long-term investment. The number of beds in state and federal penitentiaries increased 41 percent to 976,000 in the first half of this decade, while the number of correctional employees jumped 31 percent to 347,320 (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1997). This investment is so extensive that several large states now spend as much or more money to incarcerate young adults than to educate their college-age citizens (Ambrosio and Schiraldi 1997). From the 1980s through the late 1990s, corrections spending has grown at a faster rate than any other state spending category, with state corrections budgets almost tripling, increasing from \$7 billion in 1986 to more than \$20 billion in 1996 (Eckl 1998, p. 30; see also Eckl 1994).

This growth in spending on prisons is almost certainly related to a decline in growth of spending in other areas. California built about a prison a year, every year, for the past two decades, while in the same period it added only one new university (Ambrosio and Schiraldi 1997). The chancellor of the California State University System recently noted that his state is spending about \$6,000 a year per college student, compared to about \$34,000 a year per prison inmate (cited in Butterfield 1997). Similar trends are noted in other states, with the budget for Florida's department of corrections increasing \$450 million between 1992 and 1994, an increase greater than Florida's university system received in the ten previous years (Ambrosio and Schiraldi 1997). Overall, state corrections spending increased 1,200 percent between 1973 and 1993, while spending on higher education increased only 419 percent (Ambrosio and Schiraldi 1997).

These data confirm that we are spending escalating amounts of money to combat a crime problem that may finally be in decline, for reasons that may or may not include the increased use of imprisonment. Citizens in some states are showing signs of reluctance to pay the escalating costs of prisons, in ways that bear some resemblance to earlier rebellions against rising costs of education. A recent survey in California indicates that, by a margin of five to one, Californians would prefer to invest in prevention than in incarceration (California Center for Health Improvement 1997). National surveys indicate that only 31 percent of the public favor an increase in taxes to build more prisons, while the percentage of those who think that too much is being spent on crime control is slowly creeping up from around 4 percent in the 1980s to 7 percent in 1996 (Maguire and Pastore 1997; see also Ambrosio and Schiraldi 1997). This suggestion of a modest but rising disenchantment with imprisonment probably results from the fact that trade-offs between imprisonment and education are becoming too dramatic to ignore (Arum 1997). A nascent awareness of these trade-offs is the beginning of a realization of the high collateral costs of relying on imprisonment as a response to problems of crime.

The dilemma is that given fiscal constraints on governments, when we invest in prisons we often in effect make choices to disinvest in other social institutions as well as in the individuals who would otherwise receive assistance from them (Chambliss 1994; Hagan 1994). The collateral costs of this disinvestment are social as well as economic, and they especially involve the communities and children from which and whom inmates are taken.

### III. Collateral Costs in Human and Social Capital

We have pointed to a glaring cost in human capital that can result from increased spending on prisons: the withdrawal of money from educational institutions charged with the responsibility for building human capital through the transmission of knowledge and skills to students. The related concept of social capital is useful in extending our understanding to less tangible and often less directly measurable collateral costs of imprisonment.

Social capital results from membership in social networks or other social structures (Portes 1998, p. 6). Imprisonment can swiftly and irreparably alter the social networks and structures to which inmates, and those to whom they are connected, belong. When incarceration is a rare or infrequent event within a social group, the change in social

networks caused by imprisonment may be mainly a problem for the individuals involved. However, when imprisonment becomes more common and widely expected in a social group, the changes in social networks and structures may often become damaging for the group more generally.

Moore (1991) illustrates the loss of social capital in communities by describing how Chicano gangs formed and reproduced in prison spill over in their effects on the street. This spillover occurs through communication back and forth between the prison and the street, and through the eventual return of imprisoned gang members to the community of origin. A result is that both while these gang members are in prison and when they return to the street, the community at large loses cohesion and capacity to be relied on in ways that characterized earlier periods. In this way and others, the social capital not only of individuals but also of entire communities is placed at risk (see Rose and Clear 1998). These radiating effects of the increased use of imprisonment have special significance for members of minority communities in America.

An important feature of the concept of social capital is its sensitivity to the differential access minority and nonminority youth have to opportunities as a result of social connections to other individuals through social structures, especially the family and work settings that form the framework of local communities (Loury 1977, 1992). Investments in prisons uniquely dissipate the limited social capital available to children who live in already disadvantaged communities, diverting and redirecting resources and opportunities away from these young people.

This regressive, redistributive process is observable at the macrolevel when comparisons are made between the communities from which prisoners typically come in America, and the locations of the new prison settings to which they go. Towns across America now compete as sites for new prison construction and the jobs they bring, much as towns for a longer period of time have vied with one another for automotive plants and other sources of new community investment (Nadel 1995). Prisons can bring a flow of new jobs to a community, and in this way increases in imprisonment are the resource base of a new growth industry in America (California Journal 1995; Lotke 1996; Swope 1998).

New structures of opportunity are built around the construction and operation of prisons, creating sources of economic and social capital in

the host community, as old and new social networks become ports of entry into the new economy of the prison. Of course, the inmates of American prisons are taken in great disproportion from disadvantaged minority communities. Currently about half the prison inmates in the United States are African American (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1998*b*); considering the impact of incarceration for these inmates' families is especially important (King 1993). On any given day, it is estimated that nearly one in every three African-American males between twenty and twenty-nine years of age is on probation or parole or in jail or prison—that is, under supervision of the criminal justice system (Mauer and Huling 1995; Tonry 1995, tables 1–3).

Simon (1993) notes that criminal justice supervision is the most frequent exposure to government institutions for many if not most adults in American ghettos, a circumstance that amounts to “governing through crime” (Simon 1997). A reflection of the resulting salience of penal sanctions for these ghetto communities is that children in them are more likely to know someone who has been involved in the criminal justice system than to know someone who is employed in a profession, such as law or medicine (Case and Katz 1991).

Furthermore, some have argued that there has been a diffusion of prison culture to the street which has important ramifications for adolescents. For example, the style of dress popularized in the “hip hop” culture of baggy jeans and denim work shirts is a derivation from prison dress. This dissemination process may involve an anticipatory socialization of adolescents through gangs in the community for the culture of prisons, as illustrated in Vigil's (1988) ethnography of Chicano gangs in Chicago. This “prisonization” (also Moore 1996) of street life has extended beyond physical presentation, in the form of dress and appearance, to attitudes and behaviors. As large numbers of inmates return to their communities, so too does the prison subculture, which, Moore (1996, p. 73) cautions, may be “intensely hostile to established authority.”

It is a cruel irony that when young minority males are taken from their communities and imprisoned, they become a novel resource in the investment/disinvestment equation that shifts resources from one location to another, disadvantaging the minority community to the relative advantage of another community, usually in a majority group setting (Clear 1996; Moore 1996). The potential input of new resources is well recognized in the communities that compete for new prisons (McDonald 1989, cited in Clear 1996). However, the social and eco-

conomic consequences of the outflow of resources is not nearly so well understood in relation to the family and work environments that in better circumstances would serve as structural cornerstones in the minority communities from which inmates are taken (see Rose and Clear 1998).

### *A. Work, Families, and Imprisonment*

The effects of incarceration on the family and community are entangled with the issue of employment. Offenders work in both the legal and illegal sectors of the economy. Their incarceration impinges not only on their families' finances—their removal also results in the loss of a working male from that community and may produce a concomitant rise in community instability. The short- and long-term negative effects of imprisonment on future earnings and employment are outlined in this section, with an emphasis on the finding that exoffenders confront a long-term reduced prospect of stable employment and adequate earnings over their life course. The impact of unstable employment and low earnings on the families and children of offenders, as well as on their communities, must therefore be considered.

Social scientists are only beginning to investigate seriously the dynamics of work in disadvantaged communities. As they do so, they are finding that these communities are far more complicated than is commonly assumed. An important insight into the complexity of these work environments has involved the realization that individuals often work simultaneously in both criminal and more conventional forms of employment (Hagedorn 1994; Sanchez-Jankowski 1995; Hagan and McCarthy 1997*a*). More than half of state prison inmates are found to be employed at the time of their arrest (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1993). The reality, Fagan and Freeman (1999) observe, is that “many offenders drift back and forth over time between legal and illegal work.”

The overlapping nature of crime and work has important implications for our understanding of the collateral consequences of imprisonment for communities and families. These implications arise because offenders who are employed in more conventional work often contribute in positive ways to their communities and families. Added to this, it must be acknowledged that criminal activity also generates wealth, sometimes in the redistributive fashion of bringing income into a community from the outside, for example, through the cross-community drug trade.

Sullivan (1989) estimates that criminally active, working-age males

in a minority neighborhood he studied generated about \$12,000 of income in a given year. Sullivan emphasizes that this economic activity is a mixed benefit for disadvantaged communities, in that added unwanted behaviors may also be brought into the community; however, insofar as there is a net positive balance in the redistribution of resources, removal of these working age youth from the community is a collateral cost of imprisonment. Meanwhile, it is also important to keep in mind that most of those who are imprisoned will in any case ultimately return to the communities from which they come. For example, while possibly overstating the numbers, it is estimated that 80 percent of the inmates in one large New York City institution come from and return to just seven communities in New York City (Clines 1992). Meanwhile, between 1985 and 1992, 37 percent of all persons admitted into state prison in California were from Los Angeles County, which comprised only 12 percent of the state's total population; and the city of Baltimore contributed more than 50 percent of Maryland's prison admissions, but only 15 percent of the state's population (see also Lynch and Sabol 1997). Removing these individuals from their communities may typically be little more than a temporary measure.

It also bears emphasis that removing youth from their positions in the legal and illegal economy can have a negative kind of churning effect in working class labor markets, increasing community instability. This effect partly operates through a queuing process involving vacancy chains for demand-driven illegal work (Hagan 1993). For example, since the demand for drugs does not cease with the removal of a runner or even a dealer from the drug trade, when one criminal is removed from this economic chain, another new participant will usually take over the vacant role (Blumstein 1993).

The vacancy chain model may be a more common pattern in the drug economy than in sectors of the legal economy, where jobs are more likely to be left unfilled and where employers may simply conclude that it is impossible to find sufficiently durable employees to continue doing business. This is one part of a process that Wilson (1996) captures in the title of his book, *When Work Disappears*. Many minority ghettos in America have lost the workforce that is necessary to sustain viable labor market activity. Illegal work is often most of what remains, a situation Anderson (1990) illuminates in his description of the minority drug trade as the American ghetto's version of an employment agency.



The further impact of imprisonment on many minority youth and their families and communities becomes apparent in recent studies which consider the later life employment records of former prison inmates (Freeman 1992; Sampson and Laub 1993; Laub and Sampson 1995; Needels 1996). These studies make the point that imprisonment is a part of a process through which minority males in particular become embedded in social networks of crime that lead away from opportunities for legal work (Hagan 1993; Sampson and Laub 1993). At the same time that imprisonment weakens links into legal employment for these youth, the effect of the prison inmate culture is to strengthen their connection into gangs and the criminal underworld more generally (Hunt et al. 1993; Moore 1996).

The problem is that legal and illegal forms of work each create their own chainlike possibilities for further engagement and activity. Granovetter (1974) has made this point about legal jobs, noting that it is often the first job that establishes a mobility ladder within the same and adjoining occupational networks. The chances of moving onward and upward in a labor market increase as a function of learning and being exposed to the new opportunities that employment in a work sector brings. Unfortunately, this is no less true of illegal work than it is of legal employment, and as individuals become involved in one or the other kind of setting, it is opportunities within that sector that are enhanced (Hagan 1993; Hagan and McCarthy 1997*a*). Imprisonment can be a particularly consequential event in this kind of employment history. A number of studies now confirm that as time spent in prison increases, net of other background factors and involvements, the subsequent likelihood of disengagement from the legal economy increases. This is not surprising given that even those who do not have criminal records have difficulty finding employment. Hagan (1991), using data from a thirteen-year panel study, and Grogger (1995), analyzing arrest data from the California Justice Department's Adult Criminal Justice Statistical System and earnings records from the California Employment Development Department, have demonstrated that even being charged and arrested are detrimental in the near term for occupational outcomes and earnings.

Conviction and imprisonment have also been established to have a more permanent effect on legal earnings (Freeman 1992; Sampson and Laub 1993). For example, Freeman's (1992, p. 220) analysis of the Boston Youth Survey indicated that youths who were incarcerated had "exceptionally" low chances of employment; similarly, his analysis

(1992, p. 217) of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth revealed that men who had been in jail or on probation experienced “massive long-term effects on employment.” Sampson and Laub (1993) found that unstable employment and higher likelihoods of welfare dependency characterized the lives of the delinquent boys in the Gluecks’s prospective sample of five hundred delinquents and five hundred non-delinquents. Moreover, juvenile incarceration was found to have an indirect effect on the incidence of future crime, because “incarceration appears to cut off opportunities and prospects for stable employment . . . [and] . . . job stability in turn has importance in explaining later crime” (Laub and Sampson 1995, p. 256). Other data indicate that while more than half of state prisoners are employed before going to jail, only about one-fifth of those on parole are employed following imprisonment (Irwin and Austin 1994). The long-term individual, family, and community repercussions of imprisonment for employability and earnings deserve further consideration.

We have now considered a range of research suggesting the kinds of effects imprisonment has on work, families, and communities in general, providing a background for our consideration, more specifically of the effects this imprisonment may have through parents on their children.

### *B. The Children of Imprisoned Parents*

It should not come as a surprise that the presence of parents in U.S. prison populations is growing, although relatively little attention has been given to this. This change is a result of the increasing reliance on incarceration as a criminal sanction described earlier in this essay, for women as well as men. A survey by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (1993) reveals that about two-thirds of incarcerated women and more than one-half of incarcerated men are parents of children under eighteen years of age. Recent estimates show that more than 1.5 million children have a parent who is incarcerated in the United States (Bloom 1993; Johnston 1995*b*, p. 62), and many more children will have a parent incarcerated during a period of their lives. This grim reality should be a major policy concern because the imprisonment of parents, as noted in the theories reviewed at the outset of this essay, can severely diminish the economic and social capital on which families and communities depend to raise children successfully (see Sampson 1992; Hagan 1994). Studies of the families of incarcerated parents indicate that the family left behind usually suffers financial difficulties (Bloom and

Steinhart 1993). The financial difficulties and loss of a parent precipitate a range of emotional and psychological problems that affect these children, including educational failures, aggression, depression, and withdrawal (see generally, Johnston 1995*b*). Especially in disadvantaged minority communities, the children of this prison generation form a high-risk link to the future.

Although relatively little attention has been given to the consequences of criminal sanctioning for families and children, much research has focused on recidivism rates among those who have been incarcerated (see, e.g., Clear et al. 1988) and on issues of deterrence and incapacitation more generally (see, e.g., Blumstein, Cohen, and Nagin 1978). The results of this research do not seem especially encouraging, and experts remain uncertain about the relationship between punishment policy and crime rates (Reiss and Roth 1993; Tonry 1995; Lynch and Sabol 1997; Blumstein 1998; Bureau of Justice Statistics 1998*a*). A disturbing possibility raised by this literature is that offenders may defy as often as they defer to criminal sanctions (Sherman 1993).

The massive spending on penal sanctioning can be placed in a broader and more meaningful context if it is considered in terms of the indirect effects these sanctions have on the children of incarcerated parents. As Phillips and Bloom (1998, p. 539) note, "by getting tough on crime, the United States has also gotten tough on children." While we have acknowledged that it is undoubtedly the case that some unknown number of families benefits from the elimination of a dangerous or burdensome parent's incarceration, it may more often be the case that a father or mother's imprisonment can be the final, lethal blow to an already weakened family structure (Adalist-Estrin 1994; Women's Prison Association 1995).

The growth in the imprisonment of both men and women implies consequences for children who lose a parent to the criminal justice system.

1. *Incarcerated Fathers.* In 1991, it was estimated that male inmates were fathers of more than 770,00 children under age eighteen, and that about one-third of all incarcerated men with children had two or more children under age eighteen (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1993). The effects of imprisonment for men as economic actors was considered in some detail earlier, but their removal from social roles in their families and communities deserves further consideration. Many young males who are involved in crime bring legal as well as illegal income into the settings in which they live, and they may contribute in other ways to

these settings. For example, even when they are not resident in their children's homes, these fathers may often contribute not only income but also child care and social support to the resident parent (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1993; Hairston 1998).

Although the literature on nonresident fathers is not large, it is suggestive (Garfinkel, McLanahan, and Hanson 1998). The ethnographic work in this area indicates that nonresident minority fathers often make informal contributions to their children, for example, by buying toys and diapers or providing babysitting services, and in other ways demonstrating that paternity is significant to them, even when this role emphasizes emotional support and guidance more than economic responsibility (Furstenberg, Sherwood, and Sullivan 1992; Edin 1995).

Edin and Lein's (1997) intensive interviews with 379 low-income single mothers found that about one-third of the mothers on welfare and over 40 percent of the mothers who worked received cash support from a child's father. Furthermore, Decker and Van Winkle's (1996) ethnography of gang members found that all but one of the gang members who had children but did not live with them saw their children every day or nearly every day. Evidence of fathers' involvement with their children has also emerged from studies of incarcerated parents. A study of 188 fathers in a maximum-security prison in New York reported that over 74 percent of fathers lived with their child before they were incarcerated and 75 percent reported that they spent a lot of time with their children prior to their incarceration (Lanier 1993). Other studies suggest lower rates of residency with children prior to incarceration, in the area of 50 percent (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1993), but such studies often further indicate that these fathers contribute to the financial support of at least one of their children (Hairston 1995, 1998). Studies also suggest that incarcerated men with children usually wish to maintain their social status as fathers, indicating a desire to strengthen their parenting skills (Hairston 1989, 1998), expressing feelings of closeness with their children (Carlson and Cervera 1991), and expecting to live with their children after their release (Lanier 1991).

The imprisonment of a father who was residing with his family means that the family's status changes, at least temporarily, into a single parent family (Lowenstein 1986), and the impact on children of the loss of a father due to incarceration often mirrors the symptoms of children in single-parent families who have lost their fathers due to death or divorce (see, e.g., Moerk 1973; Lowenstein 1986). Often the

family faces a new array of issues, such as financial instability, and the emotional and psychological impacts on the children and spouse due to this separation (Schneller 1975; Ferraro et al. 1983; Lowenstein 1986; Fishman 1990). Interviews with the families of fifty-eight men incarcerated in a maximum security institution in Arizona revealed that 92 percent of the families experienced financial problems due to the father's absence (Ferraro et al. 1983); similarly, interviews with small samples of women in the United States and in the United Kingdom highlight the severe financial strain faced by these families (Fishman 1990; Davis 1992). Girshik (1996, p. 59) reports that "besides losing the economic contribution of her husband, a wife may lose her job due to the stigma of being married to a prisoner." Studies also suggest that once a spouse is imprisoned, couples are more likely to divorce, meaning that the temporary separation may become permanent (Hairston 1991*a*; Girshik 1996). The problems faced by the remaining family members often endure, becoming long term and chronic.

A question that this emerging literature on nonresident fathers clearly must address is whether these parents are a positive influence when they are involved in their children's families. Garfinkel, McLanahan, and Hanson (1998, p. 8) answer this question affirmatively: "With respect to the mental health and problem behavior of nonresident fathers, the ethnographies suggest that while many young fathers have trouble holding a job and may even spend time in jail, most have something to offer their children. The overwhelming impression of these young men conveyed by the literature is one of immaturity and irresponsibility rather than pathology or dangerousness. Indeed many of the fathers who are not paying child support are maintaining contact with their children and are still involved with the mothers, although often intermittently."

The possibility that even nonresident and criminally active fathers are nonetheless net contributors to family and community life therefore at least requires serious research attention.

2. *Incarcerated Mothers.* The incarceration of mothers is becoming an increasingly important issue as greater numbers of women are being imprisoned. This section charts trends in the growth of women's imprisonment, and then highlights some of the major issues resulting from their incarceration, including the custodial arrangements for the child when the mother is removed from the home, the difficulties faced by the substitute parents, and the potential parenting problems faced by women on their release from state custody.

Women represent a small part of the prison population, still less

than 10 percent, but this share is increasing as the relative growth of the female prison population is outpacing the proportionate growth of the male prison population (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1998*b*). A comparative sense of relative change in male and female imprisonment is reflected by the fact that between 1980 and 1993, the U.S. male prison population grew by about 200 percent, while the female prison population grew by more than 350 percent (Beck and Gilliard 1995). Incarceration more often is being used, for longer terms, and with declining prospects of parole, partly because federal sentencing guidelines in particular have reduced the discretion of judges to impose noncustodial sentences. These guidelines have especially increased the incarceration of women for economic offenses and drug crimes; between 1990 and 1996, the number of female inmates serving time for drug offenses grew by over 100 percent, compared to a 55 percent increase for men (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1998*b*). Sentencing guidelines leave judges reduced room for treating family responsibilities as a mitigating circumstance that encourages probation as an alternative to prison; although this affects fathers as well as mothers, it has resulted in bigger changes for mothers (Raeder 1995).

As a result, where women formerly were more likely to receive probation and short prison sentences than men, they are now more vulnerable to imprisonment (cf. Daly 1994). Chief Judge Julian Abele Cook, Jr., of the U.S. District Court in the eastern district of Michigan, illustrates this point by recounting his sentencing of a mother of two children who was pregnant with a third and sought lenient treatment based on her special circumstances (Cook 1995). This woman was minimally involved as a “coconspirator” in a drug sale. Judge Cook did not treat the parental responsibilities of the mother in the above case as extraordinary. He reasoned that “to grant (her) request would have the practical effect of establishing a precedent whereby the recent birth of a baby, coupled with the fear of being unable to identify an ‘adequate’ family member to care for the minor children, would form the basis for vacating a term of incarceration in favor of probation” (Cook 1995, p. 146). Since Judge Cook did not find these circumstances extraordinary, he concluded that he had to impose the prison sentence that the guidelines indicated. “I thought the guidelines gave me little, if any, choice,” writes Judge Cook, “other than to impose incarceration—a penalty that, in all probability, I would not have imposed in the absence of the compelling language in the statute” (1995, p. 146).

Yet, there is also a more general belief in the literature on sentenc-

ing that women receive lenient treatment relative to men, and that they in particular are less vulnerable to incarceration (see Nagel and Johnson 1994). Furthermore, there are also suggestions that prosecutors offer more beneficial plea agreements to women than to men (Coughenour 1995, p. 142). However, there is better reason to believe that women received lenient treatment in the preguidelines era than now. That is, while judges may once have been inclined to restrict the use of incarceration with both men and women who had family responsibilities (Daly 1987), sentencing reforms and guidelines have made this less likely (Daly 1994). In the more recent era, judges seem to be leaning toward imposing the same standards on men and women by disregarding the greater responsibilities of women for children in families (Daly 1995). The result is that the number of mothers of children who are being incarcerated is growing. Judges (e.g., Wald 1995) and researchers (Newton, Glazer, and Blackwell 1995) increasingly express concern about this.

A particular concern is that this trend of increasing imprisonment of parents is building without an empirical base of knowledge about its collateral consequences for children. That a large number of parents are being imprisoned (McGowan and Blumenthal 1978) implies that there is a neglected class of young people whose lives are disrupted and damaged by their separation from imprisoned mothers and fathers (Bloom 1993). Especially, but not exclusively, when a mother is incarcerated it is often uncertain who will care for her children (Johnston 1995*a*). Because there are fewer prisons for women, women are at increased risk of being incarcerated at a greater distance from their children than are men. Coughenour (1995, p. 143) reports that due to the scarcity of federal prisons for women, an average female inmate is more than 160 miles farther from her family than a male inmate. Studies indicate that at least half the children of imprisoned mothers have either not seen or not visited their mothers since incarceration (Zalba 1964; Hairston 1991*b*; Bloom and Steinhart 1993; Bureau of Justice Statistics 1994). This low rate of contact may have further negative consequences given that the maintenance of strong family relationships during incarceration may lower recidivism rates, and that “on the whole, prison inmates with family ties during imprisonment do better on release than those without them” (Hairston 1991*a*, p. 99; see also Hale 1988; Couturier 1995).

A number of other important factors differentiate the experiences of incarcerated mothers from those of incarcerated fathers. Imprisoned

mothers are more likely than imprisoned fathers to believe that their children are not happy (Koban 1983). Furthermore, since incarcerated mothers are more likely to be living with their children prior to their arrest than are incarcerated fathers, the incarceration of mothers puts their children at greater risk (Koban 1983). Single women are at increased risk of termination of their parental rights as a result of their incarceration (Smith and Elstein 1994, app. A; Genty 1995). Furthermore, the incarceration of a mother usually means that the child has to be removed from the home and placed with relatives or in foster care, with siblings sometimes being separated in order to accommodate the new arrangements (Stanton 1980; Koban 1983; Johnston 1995*a*). When children's mothers are incarcerated, their children are most likely to live with their grandparents and other relatives or friends rather than with their fathers (Raeder 1995, p. 159); a recent report indicates that half of the children of women inmates under the age of eighteen live with their grandparents (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1994), with a number of other studies corroborating this finding (Bau-nach 1985; LaPoint, Pickett, and Harris 1985; Hairston 1991*b*; Bloom and Steinhart 1993; Singer et al. 1995).

Yet, when fathers are incarcerated, their children usually remain living with their mothers, with less consequent disruption in the children's lives (Koban 1983; Hairston 1995). A recent survey indicates that while 90 percent of male inmates' children were living with the child's mother, only a quarter of the female inmates reported that the child lived with his or her father (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1993). Moreover, Koban's (1983, p. 178) research cautions that "women were disadvantaged by their dependency on an extended network of relatives, friends and social agencies for contact with their children while men could rely on the child's mother."

Meanwhile, substitute parents not only bear unexpected burdens, they also confront unique kinds of problems (see, e.g., Hungerford 1993; Barnhill 1996). In general, they are eligible for fewer benefits and receive less support than nonrelative caregivers (Phillips and Bloom 1998). One study reports that two-thirds of the caregivers to children of imprisoned mothers did not have the financial support needed to meet the necessary expenses of the child (Bloom and Steinhart 1993; see also Hungerford 1993). Furthermore, the quality of care received by the children while in caregivers' custody is unknown. While LaPoint, Pickett, and Harris (1985) report that 82 percent of the caregivers in their sample were rated as providing a high



quality of care, Hungerford found that “in most cases, the caretakers are poorly educated and do not exhibit prosocial parenting skills in watching the children” (1993, p. 130). These disparate findings suggest that further studies should be undertaken in order to assess the quality of care received by the children of incarcerated parents.

Despite the separation from their children, and the relocation of their children to other households, studies indicate that the majority of imprisoned mothers expect to resume their parenting role and reside with their children after their release—even though it is uncertain what percentage of women actually do so (Koban 1983; Baunach 1985; Hairston 1991*b*; Bloom and Steinhart 1993). Katz (1998, p. 502) points out that resuming the parenting role may be difficult for women who have been in jail, since they “frequently do not provide the drug treatment or parenting classes most women must complete before they can reunify their families. Further, upon release, women often have difficulty finding services such as housing, employment or child care that would allow them to care for their children” (see also Smith and Elstein 1994, pp. 272–80). The same holds true for women in prison. Based on a study of women in prisons, Baunach (1985) cautions that the loss of imprisoned mothers’ daily contact with their children and the subsequent loss of parental skills is coupled with feelings of inadequacy regarding their parental authority. This often makes the desire of these mothers for reunion with their children shortly after release an unrealistic goal. Finally, although many women’s families received state support prior to their incarceration, on their release they face even more serious financial difficulties in trying to support their families, with many unable to find employment (Stanton 1980). As Browne (1989, p. 219) concludes, incarcerated mothers “are a group at risk for future parental difficulties.”

The effects of imprisonment on children therefore may last far beyond their parents’ incarceration. This brings us, then, to the perhaps key research question to be asked: What is the impact of the imprisonment of parents on children?

### *C. Prior Studies of the Children of Imprisoned Parents*

Despite the theories with which this essay began, relatively little is actually known about the causal role that the penal sanctioning of parents plays in children’s lives, alone or in combination with other experiences and events in the lives of these children (Gabel 1992). For example, little is known about how this causal influence may vary with

the prior and continuing relationship between the parents, the race and gender of the parents, the prior and continuing relationships of parents with their children, the gender or age of the children, and the class and community circumstances from which the imprisoned parents and children come. Nonetheless, there is speculation that the consequences of imprisoning parents can be substantial, especially when mothers are involved: "The children of women in prison have a greater tendency to exhibit many of the problems that generally accompany parental absence including: low self-esteem, impaired achievement motivation and poor peer relations. In addition, these children contend with feelings like anxiety, shame, sadness, grief, social isolation and guilt. The children will often withdraw and regress developmentally, exhibiting behaviors of younger children, like bedwetting. . . . As the children reach adolescence, they may begin to act out in anti-social ways. Searching for attention, pre-teens and teens are at high risk for delinquency, drug addiction and gang involvement" (Women's Prison Association 1995, p. 9).

However, there have been relatively few studies of prisoners' families, and very few studies that examine the children of prisoners specifically (but see, e.g., Hungerford 1993; Johnston 1995*b*), even though research in this area began early in this century. The first of these studies focused on the financial troubles and adjustments of these families, which were found to be severe (Bloodgood 1928; Sacks 1938; see also Morris 1965; Ferraro et al. 1983). Gabel (1992) identifies several other themes in the evolution of this research literature as it relates to children, including the deception and trauma surrounding the separation from the imprisoned parent, caretaking problems, stigma, and antisocial behavior (see also Bakker, Morris, and Janus 1978; Fritsch and Burkhead 1981; Swan 1981; Lowenstein 1986). Perhaps the best known of this work is done by Sack and colleagues, who studied clinical and nonclinical samples of the children of incarcerated parents (Sack, Seidler, and Thomas 1976; Sack 1977). Sack's (1977) clinical observations of six families in which the father was imprisoned revealed that the children were preoccupied with the loss of their fathers and had a pervading sense of sadness; many suffered from separation anxiety. Sack (1977) also noted that the change in family dynamics led in some cases to rebelliousness in the child, manifested by truancy and problems at school.

A more recent study by Kampfner compared children of incarcerated mothers to a control group of children from similar high-risk

backgrounds whose mothers were not in prison. Significant differences between the samples were found, with the children of imprisoned mothers reporting long-term recall of the trauma of separation from their mothers; these children were also more likely to report an absence of emotional support: "They could not identify people who might be sources of support, and they felt that they had no one with whom they could talk about their mothers" (1995, p. 94). Drawing on observations of fifty children who visited their mothers in prison, and interviews with a smaller subsample, Kampfner notes that a number of these children displayed several symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder, namely: depression, feelings of anger and guilt, flashbacks about their mothers' crimes or arrests, and the experience of hearing their mothers' voices. Kampfner (1995, p. 97) concludes that "the traumas that these children experience due to an early separation from their primary caregiver and the difficult life that follows impact their mental health." A further study of incarcerated mothers by Hungerford (1993) found that the effects of parental incarceration on children varied by age and gender; it was especially the older children who suffered from fatalism and feelings of helplessness, and the male children were likely to mask their feelings of depression through aggression and violence.

A number of studies, based on indirect parental reports of their children's behavior and direct contact with children of incarcerated parents, also have documented adverse effects due to parental incarceration. These studies report negative outcomes, including a range of behavioral problems (Fritsch and Burkhead 1981; LaPoint, Pickett, and Harris 1985; Lowenstein 1986; Bloom and Steinhart 1993); school-related difficulties (Stanton 1980; Fishman 1990; Bloom and Steinhart 1993; Hungerford 1993; Kampfner 1995); depression (Shaw 1992; Hungerford 1993; Kampfner 1995); low self-esteem (Stanton 1980); aggressive behavior (Sack 1977; Baunach 1985); and general emotional dysfunction (Lowenstein 1986; Fishman 1990).

A further finding of special concern involves the intergenerational transmission of risks of imprisonment. Johnston (1995*b*, p. 84) reports that "parental crime, arrests, and incarceration interfere with the ability of children to successfully master developmental tasks and to overcome the effects of enduring trauma, parent-child separation, and an inadequate quality of care. The combination of these effects produces serious long-term outcomes, including intergenerational incarceration." One study suggests that children of incarcerated parents may be

six times more likely than their counterparts to become incarcerated (Barnhill and Dressel 1991, as cited in Moses 1995; see also Johnston 1995*b*, p. 67). In Hungerford's (1993) sample of children of incarcerated mothers, 40 percent of the boys aged twelve to seventeen were delinquent, while the rate of teenage pregnancy among female children was 60 percent. Finally, the Survey of Youth in Custody conducted by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (1988) found that more than half of all the juveniles and young adults studied reported a family member who had served time in jail or prison, with 25 percent reporting that their father had been incarcerated some time in the past.

The intergenerational relationship of parental incarceration and youth crime is explored in Hagan and Palloni's (1990) reanalysis of London panel data. Drawing on the stigmatization theory introduced early in this essay, Hagan and Palloni (1990, p. 292) report that "there is an intergenerational interaction effect of the labeling of parents and sons on subsequent delinquent and criminal behavior." The stigmatizing effects of parental incarceration need to be more fully explored (see also, Lowenstein 1986; Johnston 1995*b*, p. 83; Rowe and Farrington 1997).

The ways in which parental imprisonment can affect children are probably as varied as the range of parental influences on delinquency. The research literature identifies numerous family factors that affect juvenile delinquency. Thus Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber's (1986) comprehensive meta-analysis of these factors indicates that lack of parental involvement with their children, lax parental supervision, parental rejection, unstable parental marital relationships, and parental criminality are consistent predictors of juvenile conduct problems and delinquency; weaker predictors include parental discipline style, parental health, and parental absence. Furthermore, as Larzelere and Patterson (1990) demonstrate, quality of parenting can mediate the effects of family socioeconomic status on adolescent delinquency, with poor parental monitoring and discipline style related to increased delinquency in thirteen-year-old boys. Even the simple presence or absence of parents may be related to rates of delinquency. Harper and McLanahan's (1998) longitudinal study of 6,300 males between the ages of fourteen and twenty-two found that the absence of fathers doubled the odds of a boy's future incarceration, net of parental education, family income, urban residence, race, and being born to a teen mother. In sum, these findings highlight the importance of parental involvement in children's lives and the negative consequences of poor parenting. The implication is that relations between imprisonment and these

aspects of parenting should be systematically considered in future research.

Finally, a few studies suggest that the adverse effects of parental incarceration on children may vary depending on whether it is the mother or father who is removed from the household (Koban 1983). When mothers are incarcerated, children often are relocated to another home, and in such instances the loss of a parent results in the loss of the child's primary parental figure. One study comparing the effects of the loss of a mother to the loss of a father found that while male and female prisoners reported the same number of problems per child, the type of problems differed (Fritsch and Burkhead 1981). Fathers reported discipline-related problems, such as drug and alcohol use and school truancy, while mothers noted that their children "withdrew" as a result of their incarceration, crying a lot, daydreaming, and suffering academically.

The effects of imprisonment on children can be especially apparent in the transition from adolescence to adulthood (see generally Thornberry 1997; Jessor 1998). Elijah Anderson (1990) emphasizes that the presence of "old heads" in the traditional black community has been integral to the successful transition to adulthood, for both boys and girls; yet, with the increase in community instability due to crime and unemployment, the positive influence of "old heads" has declined as both they and the adolescents have disengaged from mentoring relationships. Drawing from the more general literature on the transition from adolescence to adulthood, it would seem that variation in the well-being of the children of imprisoned parents may include not only involvement in delinquency and crime (Sampson and Laub 1997), but also educational failure, precocious sexuality, premature departures from home, early childbearing and marriage, and idleness linked to joblessness (Anderson 1990; Hagan and McCarthy 1997; Matsueda and Heimer 1997; Graber, Brooks-Gunn, and Galen 1998). In addition, the signs of such impending problems should be apparent earlier in life (Matsueda and Heimer 1997). The higher-risk prospects of the children of imprisoned parents are likely to be anticipated in earlier behaviors during childhood (see, e.g., Johnston 1995*b*). The following section outlines a research agenda that can address this range of possibilities and concerns.

#### IV. Requirements of a Meaningful Research Design

Granting the significance of the questions thus far raised with regard to the well-being of the children of imprisoned parents, and lacking

research to answer these questions more systematically, it may be useful to suggest some of the parameters of the further work that needs to be initiated. Ideally, in answering the questions set out above, one might imagine a research design in which parents were randomly assigned to prison and noncustodial sentences in a social experiment that allowed a clear indication of the causal effects of imprisonment on the children of the incarcerated parents. However, criminal statutes, sentencing guidelines, and ethical prohibitions make this kind of social experiment uncommon and unlikely. The moral and policy imperatives of the criminal justice system strongly discourage randomly sending some convicted offenders to prison, while others are selected randomly for more lenient noncustodial treatment. In place of a randomized experimental design, the research that can best inform us about the effects of parental imprisonment on children will need to address a number of concerns, some of which go beyond the common requirements associated with nonexperimental designs.

First, this research will want to address the impact of parental imprisonment on children of various ages, from childhood through adolescence. This is a challenging requirement, since children confront quite different problems at different ages and stages, and this makes it more difficult to design a common measurement strategy for the children of imprisoned parents included in the research.

Second, the research will need to include guardians and step-parents as well as resident and nonresident biological parents. Essentially, the problem is one of representing the full variety of imprisoned and unimprisoned parents who participate in children's lives. Over time and across families and communities, this variety is extensive.

Third, the research should include parents who receive noncustodial as well as prison sentences, so that it is possible to make comparisons of outcomes with parents who are as much as possible like imprisoned parents, except for the incarceration experience.

Fourth, the research will be more useful if it includes the possibility of panel measurement before and after the imprisonment of a parent, to allow the near-term assessment of effects of parental imprisonment, along with the added possibility of future tracing of the involved children to determine longer-term outcomes during their transitions to adulthood.

Fifth, the research needs to incorporate comprehensive and detailed measurement of background differences between imprisoned and unimprisoned families and their children, so that it is possible to perform an analysis that takes into account the ways in which these two groups

of families vary from one another prior to the imprisonment of a parent.

Most of the above requirements are connected to the need to control for prior background differences in family circumstances associated with the imprisonment of parents. Parents who are imprisoned probably are more likely previously to have left their families and to have difficulties with the remaining parent and children in these families, including problems of violence and conflict; these families may also be more likely to have added social and economic problems prior to imprisonment. Several features of an effective research design can address this issue.

First, we can make extensive use of statistical controls for differences prior to sentencing between children of parents sentenced to prison and to noncustodial sentences. This information can be obtained from unofficial surveys and official police and court sources. For example, presentence report interviews with parents who are both imprisoned and unimprisoned offer useful opportunities for cross-validation and multiple measurement of family background differences. Differences in the well-being of children of imprisoned parents that withstand these statistical controls for preexisting differences are more likely to be attributable to the effects of imprisonment.

Second, statistical models that combine information on the decision about which offenders are sent to prison, with outcome measures of the well-being of involved children, can establish further information on the boundaries of the possible added influence of unmeasured differences between the families of parents who do and do not experience imprisonment (Manski et al. 1992). These estimates can add confidence to our knowledge of the likely range of the impact of parental imprisonment on the well-being of involved children.

Third, measures of well-being gathered on the same children after sentencing of their parents to prison can be analyzed in relation to the same measures before sentencing to assess changes over time and in response to the sentence imposed. This analysis of change can take advantage of the fact that the same children of the same family backgrounds are involved, in effect using the subjects as their own controls for background differences, so that the analysis of within child variation is a control for these differences.

Fourth, information gathered over time in panel interviews with the unsentenced parents after sentencing can be used to explore the sources of change in family circumstances and childhood experiences

that might explain differences in outcomes that persist in the above models. For example, the economic strain perspective outlined above proposes that changes in the financial resources of families who have had a parent imprisoned will explain declines in the well-being of children. Such changes in financial resources can be measured over time in the panel interviews, and these measured changes can be introduced into the analyses to determine whether this variation accounts for differences in child well-being.

Fifth, it will be useful to include added data on pairs of siblings with the same parents in the research design. This can be done simply by asking interviewed parents to provide data on more than one of their children. Since siblings of the same parents can vary, for example, in gender and age, while sharing a common family history, differences in their well-being after sentencing can be attributed to causes other than pure family selection (see Hauser and Mossel 1985).

#### *A. Measuring Gender Specific Antisocial Behavior of Children and Adolescents*

One challenge in researching effects of parental imprisonment on children will involve implementing a unified measurement scheme for identifying problems that parental imprisonment may cause from childhood through adolescence. Over the longer term we expect that these problems may be especially apparent as youth make the transition to adulthood, as they fail and withdraw from school, abandon their families of origin, enter into early parenthood and marriage, and encounter problems of joblessness. However, the antecedents of these problematic outcomes should be apparent earlier in the life cycle, and research on the effects of parental imprisonment will be more compelling if we can identify the precursors of these later outcomes. Parents or parent substitutes living with these children are an important source of information about their early problems, especially as approaching difficulties are signaled in common problem behaviors. These problems may further vary by gender, and our measurement tools should therefore be broad enough to capture these differences.

One effective way to tap this information about the problems of children could build on the use of a child behavior checklist of the kind designed by Achenbach and Edelbrock (1979) for use with parents and teachers. Designs that include both parent and teacher measures will be more compelling in providing multiple sources of measurement.



Since many criminological researchers may be unfamiliar with the child behavior checklist, we provide a brief introduction here.

The checklist items refer to specific syndromes of problem behaviors. Lizotte et al. (1992) indicate that these reported behaviors load onto nine narrow-band behavior problem scales, which in turn are divided into three broad dimensions that are designated as externalizing scales—aggressive, delinquent, and hyperactive; internalizing scales—immature, obsessive-compulsive, schizoid, somatic complaints, and uncommunicative; and a mixed scale—hostile-withdrawal. The checklist is often used as a diagnostic tool to identify children who fall at the behavioral extremes on these scales and are of clinical concern, and the externalizing scales noted above have recently been demonstrated by Lizotte et al. (1992) to be highly predictive of involvement in delinquency, as indicated in widely used self-report scales of delinquency.

An attractive feature of the checklist's inclusion of externalizing and internalizing scales is the likelihood that this can capture variation not only across ages, but also in the possibly different responses of girls and boys to the imprisonment of a parent. There is a tendency in the kind of research we are proposing to concentrate on the effects of parental absence on boys. McLanahan and Sandefur note the tendency to adopt this view in research on the effects of single parenthood on children, but they also emphasize that the effects are often just as significant for girls, although manifested in different ways. They note that "boys tend to express their feelings by acting out, whereas girls tend to hide their feelings inside" (1994, p. 56). Use of behavioral measures like the Achenbach Checklist can provide a test of this possibility, thus broadening the opportunities to consider the specific consequences of mother and father absence due to imprisonment on sons and daughters.

### *B. Losing Generations*

Although most Americans may have come to accept that high levels of imprisonment are an unchangeable cost of living in our society, they might be less inclined to do so if more was known about the collateral and unanticipated costs of imprisonment, especially for the children of incarcerated parents. The implication of not having better and more systematic research on the collateral effects of imprisonment is that we are making penal policy in a less than fully, indeed poorly, informed fashion. Neglecting to initiate and sustain systematic research on the effects of imprisoning parents on children is the metaphorical equivalent of making penal policy blindfolded. We have considered some of

the less direct but still highly consequential costs of imprisonment, including the diversion and direction of funds for prisons away from schools and from minority communities, the damaging effects of imprisonment on employment prospects, and the detrimental impact of imprisoning parents on their children. The latter impact on a new generation of children is perhaps the least understood consequence of imprisonment. We have spelled out the kind of research that is required to establish more fully the consequences for children of a growing concentration of high levels of imprisonment on young minority men and women who are parents.

The “children of the prison generation” are coming of age in communities that are increasingly recognized as high-risk settings. A National Research Council (1993) report, *Losing Generations*, stresses that “high-risk settings do not just happen: they are the result of policies and choices that cumulatively determine whether families will have adequate incomes, whether neighborhoods will be safe or dangerous, whether schools will be capable of teaching, whether health care will be available—in short, whether young people will be helped or hindered while growing up” (1993, pp. vii–viii). Said slightly differently, the degree of risk that these communities present to young people is greatly influenced by the choices we make to invest government resources in various ways.

The decision to so extensively invest in and rely on imprisonment as a solution to crime problems has unnoticed costs and consequences that we are only beginning to understand. A better understanding of these costs, especially as these costs are imposed on the children of incarcerated parents, requires a far more systematic research base than we have yet established. This research requires before and after measures of parent and child attitudes and behaviors in panel designs that, ideally, will also include data collection from teachers, and from the young people themselves, as they become old enough to self-report their own experiences and activities. This research will be expensive, if it is to effectively meet all of the needs outlined above, and this work may therefore require partnerships between government and foundation funding sources. Yet it also must be noted that this investment is actually very small relative to the current risks and costs of America’s reliance on imprisonment as the increasingly common sanction of choice.

It is not at all clear that this increased use of imprisonment has reduced levels of risk in endangered communities. Indeed, consideration of collateral consequences of imprisonment suggests that these risks

have increased. It is almost certainly the case that within the most endangered minority communities the perception of risk, especially for young people, has increased. There is great need for research that addresses these perceptions and the questions they raise.

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