

Chapter 2

Impact of Incarceration on Community Public Safety and Public Health

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The purpose of the paper is to provide data and theory to support three propositions:

- Incarceration rates have grown in concentrated ways, especially effecting poor minority males who come from impoverished neighborhoods.
- High levels of incarceration, concentrated in impoverished neighborhoods, damage the social capital of those who live there, destabilizing the capacity for informal social control.
- Reductions in informal social control have devastating consequences for public safety and public health.

The implications of this argument are that incarceration policy in the United States is an obstruction to the well-being of poor, especially minority, communities. With crime rates that have fallen nationally for about a decade, the source of growth in imprisonment is not new felons having committed dangerous crimes, but a largely inexhaustible supply of potential drug felons combined with a system that provokes high rates of failure among those who get caught up in it. This situation suggests that any chance for real reform requires changes in drug law enforcement policy.

The Growth in Incarceration Rates

In 1971, there were about 200,000 prisoners in the daily U.S. head-count. In the generation since then, we have added about 1 million people to the daily population of those in prison; counting all forms of incarceration, more than 2 million Americans are behind bars on any given day in the United States. That means that about 1.6% of all U.S. adults aged 18–50 are incarcerated. In the quarter century between 1974 and 2001, the likelihood that a U.S. citizen would go to prison sometime in his or her lifetime increased from 1.9% to 6.6% (Bonczar, 2003).

Counting probationers and parolees as people *at risk* of incarceration, there are over 6 million people for whom jail or prison time is a reality or a direct threat—an astonishing 5% of the adult population. As contrast, 7% of adults are diagnosed with serous diabetes, and 3.5% will experience potentially lethal forms of cancer.

The U.S. prison population in 1971 was high compared to other countries, but not as extreme as is the case by today's standards. Our current incarceration rate of 724 per 100,000 is the highest in the world, approached only by Russia (564), St. Kitts (539), Belarus (532), and Bermuda (532). Among Western democracies, we are an order of magnitude higher in the use of confinement: England (145), Australia (120), Canada (116), Germany (97) and France (88) all use prison at a rate that is a fraction of ours. Compared to third-world countries, we are at the top of a list that, among those making the most use of imprisonment, might not make us feel so progressive: compare our rate to the totalitarian states of Cuba (487) and China (118). Even with regard to some of the world's more despotic governments, we still lead the pack.¹ Knowing nothing else about the United States than our rate of imprisonment, an unbiased observer would be more likely to think we are an economically underdeveloped dictatorship rather than the self-proclaimed "leading voice for freedom in the world."

The United States has achieved its distinctive incarceration rate through a range of policies that have grown the penal system with little relationship to crime. The general picture is as follows: In the 1970s, the growing prison population closely mirrored increases in rates of felony crime; contrary to many predictions, the increase in imprisonment did not drive down the rate of crime. In the 1980s, however, crime first fell precipitously, then rose at a roughly equivalent rate, ending the decade about where it started. Prison populations grew annually during these shifts in crime, largely as a consequence of a reduction in the use of probation as a sentence for felony crime. In 1990, probation was the most common sentence for felony offenses. By the end of the decade, sentences to confinement outnumbered sentences to probation by a ratio of 2:1. In the early 1990s, crime rates began to fall, and did so for more than a decade. That trend appears to be ending, though it is too early to be certain. Because of declining crime, the annual number of new felony commitments to prison *also* declined. Prison populations grew nonetheless, because the amount of time served by those going to prison increased as much as 50%. [For a discussion of these three time periods, see Blumstein & Beck (2005).] Today, we have a prison population about six times larger than it was in 1971, an incarceration rate five times larger, and about the same crime rate.

It is important to emphasize how unique this prison growth is to the United States, and to accept how ingrained the prison system is in our socio-political psyche. Prisons grew in all areas of the country, under Democrat and Republican leadership, during good economic times and bad, while we were at war and during peacetime, before welfare reform and after, during the baby-boom years and after they had ended. The current stock of prisoners serving very long sentences will guarantee that prison populations will continue to grow regardless of any realistic changes in crime patterns. No other nation has this pattern of prison use. It is a peculiarly American idea to use the prison as the first-choice reaction to crime.

¹ Incarceration rate comparisons taken from Mauer (2005).

Impact on Human and Social Capital in Poor Communities

The growth in imprisonment is not a random social phenomenon. Rather, it concentrates itself within society in four important ways: age, gender, race, and place.²

Age. Confinement is disproportionately a young person's experience. Americans aged 18–44 are about two-fifths of the U.S. population, but they are more than three-quarters of the people behind bars. Young people end up in prison largely because crime is more prominent among the young. The peak age of arrest is the late teens. People rarely go to prison as a consequence of their first arrest, so it is a few years later when subsequent arrest leads to prison. The median prison stay is about 30 months (Irwin & Austin, 2006). Thus, the typical person who ends up behind bars went to prison for the first time at the age of 25 and will, by the end of his sentence, have spent a major portion of his young adulthood behind bars.

Gender. Adult men are slightly less than half of the general population, but they are more than nine-tenths of the prison population and are more than nine times more likely to end up in prison than women. Males are more prevalent in all aspects of the criminal justice system. They represent 68% of juvenile arrests, 76% of adult arrests, and 95% of prison commitments. Men end up in prison in part for the same reason young people do: they are more likely than others to be criminally active. Today 80% of men aged 18–44 are behind bars.

Race. African Americans are five times more likely to go to prison than whites, and almost twice as likely as Hispanics. Unlike age and gender data, the prominence of blacks among those who break the law is less clear. For example, blacks in high school are slightly *less* likely to report illicit drug use than whites, and victims of violent crime report that their assailants were black at a differential far less than 5:1 (Walker et al., 2004). Nonetheless, almost one-fifth of African Americans will go to prison during their lifetimes.

Place. Poor people go to prison at rates much greater than the nonpoor. In his epic study of the role of prisons in inequality, Princeton sociologist Bruce Western (2006) shows how those who enter prison are predominantly those with low human capital: undereducated, underemployed, and underskilled. Due to racial and economic segregation, those who are incarcerated tend to come in concentrated numbers from impoverished neighborhoods. Thus, some deeply poor neighborhoods in major cities have as many as one-fifth or more of their adult male residents behind bars on any given day. Of course, they cycle in and out at fairly high rates, so that over time, almost every family in some locations currently has or recently had a member in prison. In Brooklyn, high incarceration neighborhoods see one person go to prison or jail for every 8 adult males aged 18–44; in contrast, low incarceration neighborhoods send people to prison at less than one-tenth that rate. [For a detailed description of concentration by place, see Clear et al. (2005).]

The collective effect of these four types of concentration is that certain subgroups of Americans bear the brunt of U.S. prison growth. Young black males who come from impoverished places and develop limited human capital are more

² Unless otherwise cited, data for this section are taken from various federal reports of prison population demographics (especially Bonczar, 2003), justice processing statistics, and the U.S. census.

likely to go to prison in their lifetimes (see Western, 2006). This has substantial impact on social networks, social capital, and informal social control.

Social Networks. The array of personal relationships people find themselves involved in comprises their “social network.” It is upon one’s social network that one relies for social support: when a problem arises, this is the set of relationships upon which a person can call for help; when opportunities are sought, the network is the cast of people whose real-world relationships are the foundation for those opportunities. Volumes have been written on social networks, much more than can be adequately reviewed here. But a few points are important to make concerning incarceration and social networks.

First, poor people—people who are likely to go to prison—tend to have social networks that are diminished in several respects. Their networks are dominated by what is called “strong ties,” that is, ties that are reciprocal, to people whose networks include roughly the same array of relationships. Family members, for example, are often strong ties. They have fewer “weak ties,” or relationships with people whose networks include a far different cast of relationships. We develop weak ties with many of those at our workplaces. This is important (Granovetter, 1974) because strong ties do not provide access to a new set of potential relationships, whereas weak ties do (through an important weak tie to someone in a person’s network, access is given to many people in the contact’s network but not in that person’s network). Second, poor people’s social networks tend not to span outside of their local residential area, except for family ties, which are often good examples of strong ties. Thus, when a poor person is in need of some form of social support (help with a problem, intervention with some external set of forces), poor people tend to be limited to relationships in physical proximity to where they live. Thus, poor people tend to have “thin” networks comprised dominantly of “strong” ties. Third, young men play crucial relationship-building roles in social networks—they are referred to as “entrepreneurs.” They take jobs that open up employment-related social ties, they leave their local neighborhood to work and socialize, bringing outsiders into their networks and, by contact to others, into the weak ties of their families and close friends.

When young, poor black men go to prison, those who are in their social networks, especially family members, are affected in important—but largely invisible—ways. First, many family members maintain contact with a young male who has gone to prison, especially when he goes for the first time and especially if the sentence is expected to be short. This means that the energy of those who remain behind which could have been devoted to expanding and strengthening a social network is instead spent maintaining the network with the person behind bars. Since these networks were thin to begin with, the effect of the imprisonment is to further weaken them. Studies of networks find that incarceration has a small destabilizing effect, reducing the size of already depleted networks [for a discussion, see Rengifo & Waring (2006)]. The size of the network may be only part of the problem. Because young men should be contributing dynamically to the networks of those associated with them, men who are in prison constitute missing “entrepreneurs” whose absence invisibly diminishes the networks of others, not because of what they do but because of what missing men *cannot* do.

Social Capital. Social capital is the capacity a person has to obtain “goods” (support, resources, assistance, materials) through relationships with others.

Classic examples are the way parents can deal with the problems of sick children and college entrance applications. Adults with good social capital rely on friends to identify the best available medical care, or they use friendships to bring their children's applications into a positive light. Thus, social networks are the foundation for social capital. That is why weak ties are so much more valuable than strong ties—weak ties add new layers of relationships to a network that can serve as potential sources of social capital when inevitable problems come along. One way of looking at the intersection of social networks and social capital is that when a person's human capital—his or her own personal skills and abilities—and wealth are insufficient to deal with a problem in life, the resources available to one's social networks are activated through the mechanism of interpersonal relationships, and the dormant capacity of those networks is a person's social capital.

By definition, social capital is lacking in poor neighborhoods. People who live in poor places do not have many personal resources to call upon for social support, other than their immediate family and their personal capabilities. They tend to go to state supported services for help when they are in need, making use of public welfare, free counseling, and drop-in health clinics. If these services are not adequate, they often do without help.

The weakening of social networks that results from incarceration of young adults, especially men, has profound implications for social capital. This begins as social networks are affected in the way described above. This small deterioration in social networks adds up, when there is an entire community of people who are similarly affected. Each small diminishment in capacity is multiplied across family units and related networks. Most people whose social networks took a temporary "hit" would compensate by turning to others, but this is not possible in communities where networks were weak to begin with, on top of which virtually *every* network is damaged by incarceration in much the same way. The impact of incarceration becomes multiplied when it becomes ubiquitous, because the usual compensations are unavailable. The result is that state-sponsored and volunteer services grow in importance for places with limited social capital, simply as a result of the ever diminishing set of options [see Rose & Clear (1998)].

Informal Social Control. Hunter (1985) has defined three levels of social control. Public controls are operated by the state: police, courts, and prisons on the one hand; schools, welfare, and social services on the other. Parochial social controls are community-level groups that stabilize a place's community life; for example, the barbershop has historically played this role in black communities and religious institutions do the same. Private social control includes intimate interpersonal relations, most characteristically the family [for an expanded discussion, see Bursik & Grasmick (1993)]. Two important points can be made from this classification. First, these levels of social control can operate independently, but they typically are in interplay with each other to provide public safety. Second, of the three, the public safety importance of public social control pales in comparison to private and parochial levels of social control.

These can also be seen as (at least potentially) compensatory forms of social control. If private social controls are effective, there is little pressure on parochial or public social controls. When private controls fail, parochial controls can be strained, and public controls attempt to enter the breach. Without the



<http://www.springer.com/978-0-387-71694-7>

Public Health Behind Bars

From Prisons to Communities

Greifinger, R.B. (Ed.)

2007, XVI, 576 p. 56 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-0-387-71694-7