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Incarceration and Prisoner Reentry in the United States

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Abstract

This chapter addresses the reentry challenges faced by low-skilled men released from U.S. prisons. I empirically characterize the increases in incarceration occurring since 1970 and assess the degree to which these changes result from changes in policy as opposed to changes in criminal behavior. I discuss what is known about the children of inmates and the likelihood that a child in the United States has an incarcerated parent. The chapter then addresses the employment barriers faced by former prison inmates with a particular emphasis on how employers view criminal history records in screening job applicants. Finally, I discuss a number of alternative models for aiding the reentry of former inmates. Transitional cash assistance, the use of reentry plans, traditional workforce development efforts, and transitional jobs for former inmates are all among the tools used across the United States. I review the existing evaluation literature on the effectiveness of these programmatic interventions.

Keywords: Prisoner reentry, incarceration, workforce development

Incarceration and Prisoner Reentry in the United States

Introduction

Over the past 30 years in the United States, states and the federal government have increased the frequency with which incarceration is used to sanction criminal activity, as well as the length of the sentences imposed and ultimate time served for specific offenses. Through a myriad of sentencing policy changes and changes in postrelease supervision, the nation's incarceration rate has increased to unprecedented levels and now exceeds that of every other country. For lesser-educated men, and especially less-educated minority men, the likelihood of serving prison time is high (many are more likely to serve time than not). Moreover, among certain sub-groups of noninstitutionalized men, large proportions have served prison time in the past.

The challenges faced by former inmates attempting to reenter noninstitutionalized society are vast. Many have tenuous housing arrangements. Prison time weakens social connections to families and friends. Most former inmates have poor job skills, and face stigma associated with their criminal records. Many of these reentrants fail and are sent back to prison, often for violating the conditions of their supervised release, but sometimes for the commission of new felony offenses. Such failures are costly, as admitting someone anew to prison costs more than supervision in the community and new victimizations are clearly a social bad.

Moreover, the adverse effects of incarceration and failed reentry extend beyond the inmates themselves. In 2007, roughly 52 percent of state prisoners and 63 percent of prisoners in federal penitentiaries had children under the age of 18 (Glaze and Maruschak 2009). Many of these inmates lived with their children prior to their incarceration. In total, 2.3 percent of children

in the United States had a parent in prison in 2007. The proportion with parents who have ever done time in prison is certainly higher.

In this chapter, I discuss the reentry challenges faced by increasing numbers of low-skilled men released from prison each year. I begin with an empirical description of the magnitude of the issue. Since the mid-1970s, the U.S. incarceration rate has increased over fourfold largely due to policy choices pertaining to sentencing and the post-release monitoring of parolees. This increase has disproportionately affected less-educated black men and has greatly increased the lifetime risk of serving time. I document these changes and describe what is known about who currently serves and who will eventually serve time. I discuss what is known about the children of inmates and the likelihood that a child in the United States has an incarcerated parent.

Former inmates face a number of challenges upon leaving prison that greatly impede their employment prospects. Low formal levels of schooling, low levels of accumulated labor market experience, and employer reluctance to hire former inmates are among these barriers. I empirically document these challenges. I also review the research pertaining to how employers view criminal history records in screening job applicants.

Finally, I discuss a number of alternative models for aiding the reentry transition of former inmates. Transitional cash assistance, the use of reentry plans, traditional workforce development efforts, and transitional jobs for former inmates are all among the tools used across the United States. I review the existing evaluation literature on these programmatic interventions with regards to their impacts on post-release employment and recidivism and highlight potential fruitful policy options.

Why Are So Many Americans in Prison?

The United States currently incarcerates its residents at a very high rate. Combining state and federal prisoners and local jail inmates, there were 765 inmates per 100,000 U.S. residents in 2007.[1] This compares with a world average of 166 per 100,000 and an average among European Community member states of 135 (International Centre for Prison Studies 2007). Of the approximately 2.3 million U.S. residents incarcerated in 2007, roughly 66 percent were inmates in state and federal prisons while the remaining 34 percent resided in local jails.

Current U.S. incarceration rates are also unusually high relative to historical figures for the United States itself. Figure 1 displays historical data on state and federal prison inmates per 100,000 U.S. residents. Prior to the mid-1970s, the incarceration rate was stable, hovering in a narrow band around 110 inmates per 100,000. Thereafter, however, the incarceration rate increases precipitously. Between 1975 and 2007, the prison incarceration rate more than quadrupled, from 111 to 502 per 100,000. The annual incarceration rate increased by an average of 15.7 inmates per 100,000 per year during the 1980s, 16.8 inmates per year during the 1990s, and 5 inmates per year during the first seven years of the new century.

<FIGURE 1>

Behind this steady increase in the incarceration rate are large flows of inmates into and out of the nation's prisons. While there are certainly many prisoners that are serving very long sentences in the nation's penitentiaries, there are many more U.S. residents who serve relatively short spells in prison and/or who cycle in and out of correctional institutions serving sequential short spells over substantial portions of their adult lives. As demonstrated by Travis (2005), nearly all inmates are eventually released from prison, most within 5 years of admission. Most

tellingly, annual admissions to U.S. prisons have consistently hovered around one-half the size of the prison population, while slightly less than half of all inmates are released in any give year.

What is driving these enormous increases in incarceration rates? Changes in incarceration rates are driven by three broad categories of factors that likely exert reciprocal influences on one another. First, the incarceration rate will depend on crime rates. Second, the incarceration rate will be higher the greater the likelihood of being sent to prison conditional on committing a crime. Finally, the longer the amount of time that an individual committed to prison can expect to serve the higher the incarceration rate. These three factors can be measured by the crime rate, the number of prison commitments per crime committed, and the expected value of time served conditional on being sent to prison.

Table 1 presents estimates of these values for 1984 and 2002 from my research with Michael Stoll (2009) using National Corrections Reporting Program (NCRP) data for various years as well as data from the Uniform Crime Reports.[2] There are sizable increases in the expected value of time served within all crime categories. In other words, conditional on being sent to prison, and conditional on the crime committed, felons admitted in 2002 face much longer prison spells than offenders admitted in 1984.

<TABLE 1>

In addition, prison admissions per 100,000 as well as prison admissions per crime committed have increased considerably, especially for drug offenses and parole violations. In Raphael and Stoll (2009), we found very little evidence of an increase in arrest rates for specific crimes. Thus, the increased admissions rates reflect entirely an increase in the propensity to punish apprehended offenders with a spell in prison. While it is impossible to assess whether re-

offending among parolees has increased, it is worth noting that over this time period the annual parole failure rate increased appreciably.

Finally, comparing crime rates in 1984 and 2002 reveals sizable declines in crime, especially property crime. While there is a notable increase in drug crime, it should be kept in mind that drug crimes are measured by arrests in this table. Hence, this surely reflects changes in policy regarding drug enforcement as well as possible changes in offending levels.

If one is willing to assume that, holding offense constant, those being admitted in the latter year are comparable to those admitted in the earlier year, then a natural interpretation of the patterns described in Table 1 is that sentencing and parole policy have become much tougher. The table indicates that there is little role for crime trends.

Of course, current crime rates are certainly lower today as a result of the massive increases in incarceration rates. Higher incarceration rates incapacitate a larger proportion of the population (i.e., an adult behind bars cannot commit crime in noninstitutionalized society) and the higher incarceration risk may deter some would-be offenders. Even accounting for this fact, however, increases in crime cannot explain a substantial portion of incarceration growth.

The column in Table 1 labeled "2002 Counterfactual" provides our best guess of what crime rates would have been had sentencing practices in the United States not changed since 1984.[3] Crime would certainly have been higher in the absence of sentencing changes due to less incapacitation and deterrence, and hence the incarceration rate would have increased. However, we tabulate that the incarceration rate would have increased by no more than 17 percent of the actual increase experienced over this time period, leaving the remaining 83 percent attributable to changes in policy. Moreover, even this 17 percent is likely to be an overestimate as this tabulation attributes the entire increase in drug arrests to changes in behavior rather than changes

in drug enforcement policy.[4] Hence, our decomposition suggests behavior, in terms of variation in crime rates, is a bit player in the story.[5] On the other hand, policy changes, in particular a large increase in the severity of punishment, is of first-order importance.

Who Served Time in the U.S.?

The impacts of changes in sentencing policy have not been borne equally across demographic groups. Those who are male, relatively less educated, and minority have experienced the largest increases in incarceration. Table 2 presents tabulations from the 2007 American Community Survey (ACS) demonstrating the proportion of various groups that are incarcerated in either prison or jail on a given day. The first notable pattern concerns the enormous racial disparities in incarceration rates. While 1.4 percent of non-Hispanic whites and 0.6 percent of non-Hispanic Asians are incarcerated on any given day in 2007, 8 percent of African American men are in either jail or prison. The Hispanic male incarceration rate (2.8 percent) while lower than that for African Americans, is double that of white males.

<TABLE 2>

There are even larger disparities among subpopulations defined by educational attainment and age. For all groups, the least educated have the highest incarceration rates. However, these rates are particularly high for black high school dropouts (19 percent compared with 5 percent for white male high school dropouts and 4.1 percent for Hispanic male high school dropouts). Among all race-education groups, the highest incarceration rates are observed for men ages 26 to 35. Again, the highest rates are observed for black men, with nearly 30 percent of black high school dropouts in this age range in prison or jail on any given day.

To be sure, the proportion of men that have ever served time is certainly higher. Most inmates eventually return to noninstitutionalized society and live the remainder of their lives

outside of institutions, usually after several failed attempts at reentry. Thus, increases in incarceration rates tend to leave in their wake increases in the population of former inmates.

Figure 2 presents estimates from the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) of the percentage of adult men who have ever served time in a state or federal prison by race/ethnicity for the years 1974, 1991, and 2001. For African American men, this percentage increases from 8.7 percent to 16.6 percent between 1974 and 2001. We also observe increases for white and Hispanic men, though these are small by comparison. Figure 3 presents a further disaggregation of the 2001 estimates for specific age groups. Not surprisingly, the percentage that have ever served time is the highest for the age groups with the highest incarceration rates, with over 20 percent of African American men between 25 and 44 years of age having served time at some point in their lives.

<FIGURE 2>

<FIGURE 3>

While the BJS does not present estimates of having ever served time by level of educational attainment, several researchers have investigated this question using longitudinal survey data as well as administrative prison records. In an analysis of administrative records from the California Department of Corrections, I have estimated that at the close of the 1990s, over 90 percent of black male high school dropouts, and 10 percent to 15 percent of black male high school graduates have served prison time in the state (Raphael 2005). Pettit and Western (2004) estimate that for all African American men born between 1965 and 1969, the proportion who have been to prison by 1999 was 20.5 percent for all men, 30.2 percent for black men without a college degree, and 58.9 percent for black men without a high school degree.

A final summary measure of changes in the incidence of incarceration is the lifetime likelihood of serving time by year of birth. The BJS has published this projection for men by race and ethnicity using incarceration rates and prison entry probabilities to forecast the likelihood that a child born in a specific year will serve time. Figure 4 presents these projections for several years between 1974 and 2001. The lifetime likelihood of serving prison time for a black male child born in 2001 stood at 32 percent. This compares to a lifetime risk of 13 percent for a black male child born in 1974. For Hispanic males, the lifetime risk increases from 4 percent to 17.2 percent, while white males experience a more modest increase from 2 percent to 6 percent.

<FIGURE 4>

Thus, the U.S. incarceration rate has increased considerably. Moreover, given the fluidity of prison populations, the population of noninstitutionalized former inmates has grown continuously and now constitutes sizable minorities, and in some instances majorities, of certain subgroups of U.S. men. The increase in incarceration has been borne disproportionately by less-educated minority men. Moreover, this increase is largely the result of policy choices pertaining to sentencing and parole policy rather than changes in criminal behavior.

The Children of the Incarcerated

While the likelihood of engaging in criminal activity increases during one's teen years and peaks between the ages of 18 and 20, the likelihood of incarceration is highest for men between the ages of 25 and 34. This delay likely reflects the time difference between apprehension and sentencing, the impact of sentence length on the age distribution of inmates, and the apprehension of the criminally active during a period that is likely to represent the waning years of the most criminally active portions of their lives.

This age profile, however, also corresponds with periods of high fertility, meaning that many of the men and women behind bars are parents of minor children. Moreover, the large increases in incarceration rates experienced in the past few decades must correspond with large increases in the number and proportion of children who experience a parental incarceration.

Table 3 presents tabulations from Glaze and Maruschak (2009) showing the proportion of prison inmates with minor children by age, gender, and whether inmates are in state or federal prisons. Slightly over half of male state prison inmates and 60 percent of female state prison inmates are the parents of children less than 18 years of age. Among the age groups composing the bulk of the prison population (25 to 34 and 35 to 44), the proportion that are parents is considerably higher, with the figure reaching 80 percent among female state prisoners between 25 and 34. The patterns for federal prisoners are similar, although in federal prisons male inmates are generally more likely to have minor children than female inmates.

<TABLE 3>

All in all, Glaze and Maruschak (2009) estimate that approximately 800,000 of the 1.5 million state and federal prisoners in the U.S. were the parents of 1.7 million minor children. Moreover, given the relatively high incarceration rates experienced by minority men, the incidence of parental incarceration differs greatly across racial groups. Figure 5 presents estimates from Glaze and Maruschak (2009) of the proportion of minor children in 2007 with a parent in either state or federal prison. Overall, 2.3 percent of minor children in 2007 had a parent in prison. The rate for white children was considerably below the national average (0.9 percent). The rate for black and Hispanic children was considerably above that for whites, with 6.7 percent of black children (7.4 times the rate for white children) and 2.4 percent of Hispanic children (2.6 times the rate for white children) having a parent incarcerated in 2007.

<FIGURE 5>

Little is known about the cumulative risks of experiencing a parental incarceration—i.e., the proportion of children with at least one parent ever experiencing a prison spell or the proportion of children who will eventually experience a parental incarceration. Nonetheless, we know that the proportion of men who have ever been to prison is over double the proportion of men incarcerated on any given day. Hence, one ballpark estimate of the proportion of children experiencing a parental incarceration would be double the rates presented in Figure 5.

Fortunately, we do have existing estimates of the cumulative risk of a paternal incarceration among children who reside at some point with their fathers. In an analysis of longitudinal data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), Johnson (2009) estimates the likelihood that PSID children born between 1968 and 2005 whose father lived with them at least one year during the study period experience their fathers serving time in prison or jail. To be sure, these figures are likely to be biased estimates of the cumulative risk of paternal incarceration in prison due to a number of factors. First, many of these children are growing up during time periods when the incarceration risk was appreciably lower than today. Moreover, the sample selection criteria that the children must reside with their father for at least one year excludes all fathers who never live with their children (a group of men who are perhaps at higher risk of serving a prison spell). Both of these considerations suggest that these estimates from the PSID are lower bound. Biasing in the other direction, measuring incarceration spells in prison or jail will capture many spells for relatively minor offenses and will certainly yield higher rates than one would find if the analysis focused on prisons specifically.

Table 4 presents Johnson's estimates of the proportion of children whose fathers serve a prison term. The table provides estimates for black and white children and by the father's level

of educational attainment. Roughly 19 percent of black children in this cohort experience a paternal incarceration compared with 10 percent of white children in the sample. The incidence is highest among the children of the least educated men, with fully one-third of the children of black high school dropouts experiencing a paternal incarceration. Thus, the one estimate of cumulative risk of parental incarceration suggests that this rate is considerably higher than the point-in-time estimate of the proportion of children with an incarcerated parent on a specific day.

<TABLE 4>

The impact of a parental incarceration on childhood outcomes is an important topic that is relatively understudied. It is quite easy to demonstrate that the children of the incarcerated have relatively poor outcomes in behavioral, educational, and criminal justice domains. It is harder, however, to disentangle the separate effects of parental incarceration from the impact on childhood outcomes of all of the other factors correlated with a parental incarceration (such as parental education, household poverty, neighborhood of residence, race/ethnicity, etc.). This debate regarding causality aside, it is hard to deny that a parental incarceration interrupts the lives of children and is likely to impose material hardships on the children and their families.

While I cannot sort out the issues surrounding causality in this brief discussion, I can discuss some of the key factors that may be affected by the incarceration of a parent. Perhaps the most immediate domain affected is the living arrangements of the children left behind. Glaze and Maruschak (2009) use a 2004 survey of inmates to assess who is caregiving the children of the incarcerated. Figure 6 reproduces their results. For male inmates who are parents, the overwhelming majority of their children are residing with the other parent (88 percent) although a nontrivial proportion of these children are also receiving care from their grandparents (13 percent) and other relatives (5 percent).[6] A relatively small proportion of the children of male

inmates are in the foster care system (2 percent). The picture is quite different, however, for the children of female prison inmates. Only 37 percent of the children of female inmates are being cared for by their fathers, while 45 percent and 23 percent are being cared for by a grandparent or another relative, respectively. Roughly 11 percent of these children are in the foster care system.

<FIGURE 6>

Of course, the high propensity of the children of prison inmates to be living with adults other than their parents may not be entirely due to prison. It's possible that many of these incarcerated parents were not living with their children prior to incarceration for various reasons. While this is true to some extent, the data do indeed indicate that over half of incarcerated parents were residing with their children prior to their most recent prison spell.[7] Hence, the incarceration of a parent is certainly likely to disrupt the living arrangements of their minor children.

An additional domain that I can characterize with available data concerns the impact of a paternal incarceration on the material well-being of households. Johnson (2009) analyzes how the household incomes and poverty rates of children born between 1985 and 2000 were affected by the incarceration of their fathers. The results of this analysis are reproduced in Table 5. In the year prior to a father's incarceration, average annual households income in 1997 dollars stood at $38,960. During the period of incarceration, average annual household income drops by nearly $9,000. Concurrently, the proportion of these children living in households below the poverty line is 22 percent prior to the father's incarceration. During the father's incarceration, this poverty rate increases to nearly 31 percent.

<TABLE 5>

Thus, many children are affected by the incarceration of their parents, with the impact being disproportionately felt by African American children. While I have not done justice to the many possible ways that a parental incarceration affects the lives of children (and certainly have not addressed the thorny issue of causal inference), it is undoubtedly the case that the children of the incarcerated are more likely to reside with adults who are not their parents and that parental incarceration coincides with a decline in household income and an increase in child poverty.

How Does Serving Time Affect One's Employment Prospects?

Former inmates reentering noninstitutionalized society face a number of challenges in procuring and maintaining stable employment. To start, former inmates tend to have low levels of educational attainment, little formal work experience, and have other characteristics associated with poor employment prospects. To illustrate, Table 6 presents tabulations from the releases file of the 2003 National Corrections Reporting Program (NCRP) data. These data present micro-level information on all inmates leaving prison during the calendar year for the 35 participating states. I provide tabulations for all reentering inmates as well inmates by race/ethnicity. Prison releases are overwhelmingly male (0.897) and are disproportionately minority (52 percent black and 20 percent Hispanic). Roughly 54 percent of returning inmates have not completed a high school degree, with a slightly higher figure for black and Hispanic releases. The median reentering inmate is 32 years of age and is finishing a 21-month spell in prison. However, many of these inmates have served prior time, with fully 33 percent indicating that they have a prior felony incarceration (prior to the current spell). Certainly, many have also served time in local jails awaiting the adjudication of the charges leading to the current spell. Nearly three-quarters of released inmates are conditionally released, meaning that they are under the active supervision of the state's community corrections system.

<TABLE 6>

The human deficits of former inmates are likely to limit their employment prospects after release from prison. However, the experience of incarceration may further limit one's employment opportunities. What causal pathways may link changes in incarceration rates to the employment outcomes of low-skilled men? First, there is a simple contemporaneous mechanical incapacitation effect of incarceration, in that institutionalized men cannot be employed in a conventional manner. While labor force attachment among the criminally active is relatively low, there is evidence indicating that a substantial proportion of prison inmates were gainfully employed at the time of their arrest. Hence, incarceration certainly prevents some from working who would otherwise be employed.[8]

Beyond this contemporaneous effect, incarceration is also likely to have a lagged impact on the employment prospects of former inmates as well as a contemporaneous impact on the employment outcomes of men who have not been to prison yet come from demographic subgroups with high incarceration rates. On the positive side, a spell in prison may straighten some men out, instilling a desire to avoid future prison spells and to live a conventional, law-abiding life. Such a positive impact is akin to what criminologists refer to as a specific deterrent effect of incarceration, and may ultimately increase the employability of former inmates.

On the negative side, inmates fail to accumulate human capital while incarcerated and may experience an erosion of pro-social tendencies and perhaps the enhancement of antisocial attitudes and a propensity towards violence. Moreover, the stigmatizing effects (sometimes exacerbated by state and federal policy) associated with a prior felony conviction and incarceration faced by all former inmates is certainly an obstacle faced while searching for a job. There is a further avenue, other than the mechanical, by which incarceration may

contemporaneously impact the employment prospects of low-skilled minority men. Employers may statistically discriminate against men from high incarceration demographic groups in an attempt to avoid hiring ex-offenders. All of these pathways are likely to suppress the current and future employment and earnings of men from demographic groups with high incarceration rates. This impact adversely affects the material well-being of those men directly affected as well as of those intimates and children whose welfare is determined interdependently.

Incarceration and the accumulation of work experience

Serving time interrupts one's work career. The extent of this interruption depends on both the expected amount of time served on a typical term as well as the likelihood of serving subsequent prison terms. The average prisoner admitted on a new commitment faces a maximum sentence of 3 years and a minimum of 1 year (with many serving time closer to the minimum) (Raphael and Stoll 2005). If this were the only time served for most, then the time interruption of prison would not be that substantial.

However, many people serve multiple terms in prison, either because they commit new felonies or they violate parole conditions post-release. A large body of criminological research consistently finds that nearly two-thirds of ex-inmates are rearrested within a few years of release from prison (Petersilia 2003). Moreover, a sizable majority of the re-arrested will serve subsequent prison terms. Thus, for many offenders, the typical experience between the ages of 18 and 30 is characterized by multiple short prison spells with intermittent, and relatively short, spells outside of prison.

In prior longitudinal research on young offenders entering the California state prison system, I documented the degree to which prison interrupts the early potential work careers of young men. I followed a cohort of young men entering the state prison system in 1990 and

gauged the amount of time served over the subsequent decade (Raphael 2005). The median inmate served 2.8 years during the 1990s, with the median white inmate (3.09 years) and median black inmate (3.53 years) serving more time and the median Hispanic inmate (2.23 years) serving less time. Roughly 25 percent served at least 5 years during the 1990s while another 25 percent served less than 1.5 years.

However, as a gauge of the extent of the temporal interruption, these figures are misleading. Cumulative time served does not account for the short periods of time between prison spells where inmates may find employment, yet are not able to solidify the employment match with any measurable amount of job tenure. A more appropriate measure of the degree to which incarceration impedes experience accumulation would be the time between the date of admission to prison for the first term served and the date of release from the last term.

I found that 5 years elapses between the first date of admission and the last date of release for the median inmate. For median white, black, and Hispanic inmates, the comparable figures are 6.2, 6.5, and 3.2 years, respectively. For approximately one-quarter of inmates, 9 years pass between their initial commission to prison and their last release. In other words, one-quarter of these inmates spend almost the entire decade cycling in and out of prison.

Spending 5 years of one's early life (6.5 years for the median black offender) cycling in and out of institutions must affect one's earnings prospects. Clearly, being behind bars and the short spans of time outside of prison prohibit the accumulation of job experiences during a period of one's life when the returns to experience are the greatest.

Does having been in prison stigmatize ex-offenders?

The potential impact of serving time on future labor market prospects extends beyond the failure to accumulate work experience. Employers are averse to hiring former prison inmates and

often use formal and informal screening tools to weed ex-offenders out of the applicant pool. Given the high proportion of low-skilled men with prison time on their criminal history records, such employer sentiments and screening practices represent an increasingly important employment barrier, especially for low-skilled African American men.

Employers consider criminal history records when screening job applicants for a number of reasons. For starters, certain occupations are closed to felons under local, state, and in some instances, federal law (Hahn 1991). In many states employers can be held liable for the criminal actions of their employees. Under the theory of negligent hiring, employers can be required to pay punitive damages as well as damages for loss, pain, and suffering for acts committed by an employee on the job (Craig 1987). Finally, employers looking to fill jobs where employee monitoring is imperfect may place a premium on trustworthiness and screen accordingly.

In all known employer surveys where employers are asked about their willingness to hire ex-offenders, employer responses reveal a strong aversion to hiring applicants with criminal history records (Holzer, Raphael, and Stoll 2006, 2007; Pager 2003). For example, over 60 percent of employers surveyed in the Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality (MCSUI) indicated that they would "probably not" or "definitely not" hire applicants with criminal history records, with "probably not" being the modal response. By contrast, only 8 percent responded similarly when queried about their willingness to hire current and former welfare recipients.

The ability of employers to act on an aversion to ex-offenders, and the nature of the action in terms of hiring and screening behavior, will depend on employer accessibility to criminal history record information. If an employer can and does access criminal history records, the employer may simply screen out applicants based on their actual arrest and conviction records. In the absence of a formal background check, an employer may act on their aversion to

hiring ex-offenders using perceived correlates of previous incarceration, such as age, race, or level of educational attainment to attempt to screen out those with criminal histories. In other words, employers may statistically profile applicants and avoid hiring those from demographic groups with high rates of involvement in the criminal justice system.

Such propensity to statistically discriminate is evident in the interaction effect of employers' stated preference regarding their willingness to hire ex-offenders, their screening behavior on this dimension, and their propensity to hire workers from high incarceration rate groups. This relationship is illustrated in Figure 7, which reproduces some of the key findings in Holzer, Raphael, and Stoll (2006). The figure presents tabulations of employer survey data collected in 1993/1994 pertaining to the proportion of employers whose most recent hire is a black male by their self-reported willingness to hire ex-offenders interacted with a self-report regarding whether the employer uses criminal history background checks in screening their potential employees. Among employers who indicate that they are willing to hire ex-offenders, there is no statistically discernable difference in the proportion of recent hires who are black men between those who check and those who do not check criminal backgrounds. Among employers who indicate that they are unwilling to hire ex-offenders, however, checking criminal background is associated with 5.6 percentage point increase in the likelihood that the most recent hire is a black male. Thus, among those most averse to hiring former inmates, checking backgrounds actually increases the likelihood that the firm hires black males. This pattern indicates that in the absence of such objective screening methods, employers use more informal screening tools (such as not hiring black males) to weed out potential former inmates. Holzer, Raphael, and Stoll (2006) find similar patterns with regards to employer willingness to hire other

stigmatized groups of workers, such as those with large unaccounted for gaps in their employment histories.

<FIGURE 7>

With regards to the direct effect of stigma on former inmates themselves, the audit study by Pager (2003) offers perhaps the clearest evidence of employer aversion to ex-offenders and the stigma associated with having served time in prison. The study uses male auditors matched on observable characteristics including age, education, general appearance, demeanor, and race/ethnicity, to assess the effects of prior prison experience on the likelihood that each auditor is called back for an interview. The author finds consistently sizable negative effects of prior prison experience on the likelihood of being called back by the employer, with call-back rates for the auditor with prior prison time one-half that of the matched co-auditor.

Discussion: What Can Be Done to Ease the Reentry of Former Prison Inmates?

The challenges faced by former prisoners reentering noninstitutional society are many. Over 700,000 inmates are released each year from the nation's state and federal prisons. Many will fail and be returned to prison for technical parole violations or new felony offenses. Many more will live in abject poverty and face hurdles in attempting to secure employment and reintegrate into everyday life. What can be done to aid this transition and maximize the likelihood of successful reentry?

To start, the scale of the reentry challenge would be considerably more manageable if we could reduce the annual inflow of new prison admissions. As was already discussed, nearly all men admitted to prison are eventually released and thus reform and intervention that stems the front-end inflow would also reduce the annual outflow from the nation's penitentiaries. We have seen that much of the increase in incarceration over the past few decades has been driven by

changes in sentencing policy, with the increased use of incarceration and the increases in time served for specific offenses being the principal culprits. It is high time that the states and the federal government review and rationalize sentencing practices with an eye on reducing the prison population while maintaining public safety. In research with Rucker Johnson (Johnson and Raphael 2007), we find that the crime-abating impact of increases in incarceration have declined considerably in recent years as we are increasingly incarcerating less criminally active individuals. In other words, we are preventing very few crimes by incarcerating many inmates whom we would not have incarcerated in the past. Moreover, the crimes that we are preventing by incarcerating these marginal inmates tend to be less serious forms of property crime and/or low-level drug offenses. Given the large monetary and social costs of incarceration, we need to reevaluate whether we are overusing incarceration in punishing nonviolent offenders.

Sentencing reform aside, there is quite strong evidence that human capital accumulation appears to reduce criminal activity and the likelihood of serving time. Lochner and Moretti (2004) present quite convincing research results indicating that marginal increases in formal educational attainment considerably reduce the likelihood of incarceration among those on the margin between dropping out and not dropping out of high school. In addition, many early childhood interventions (reviewed in Donohue 2009) appear to reduce criminal activity later in life. To the extent that we can reduce criminal activity and incarceration through educational and developmental programs, we should.

Interestingly, several experimental evaluations find that programs such as Job Corps (Schochet et al. 2001), JOBSTART (Cave et al. 1993), as well as the workforce development programs studied in the national JTPA evaluation (Bloom et al. 1994) significantly increased the formal educational attainment of program participants. The Job Corps program raised formal

schooling levels among treatment group members by nearly a full year. The Job Corps evaluation also found significant and substantial impacts on arrest rates, convictions, and incarceration. Researchers and policymakers should be exploring and evaluating the use of programs designed to increase high school graduation rates. Conditional cash transfer programs or any other intervention that provides the incentive to complete secondary schooling should be conceived of as possible tools in addressing the nation's reentry challenges, as reductions in criminal activity and front-end admissions will transmit directly to lower levels of releases.

With regards to those individuals being released from the nation's prisons, a number of prototypical models have been employed to guide reentry. As most inmates are conditionally released from prison usually to the authority of the state's community corrections system, the primary intervention experienced by the majority of releases concerns the conditional supervision and compliance requirements of parole. Parole requires regular meetings with a parole officer, having to report any changes in residence, confinement to one's county of release, work requirements, and often prohibition against drug and/or alcohol abuse. While parole officers can and often do refer parolees to service providers, their main function is to monitor the activities of recent releases and to punish violators.

Aside from postrelease surveillance, several alternative models have been used to ease the reentry process and foster reintegration. One of the most pressing issues for recently released inmates concerns having the needed resources when leaving prison to feed, clothe, and house oneself in the days following release. Most states provide released prisoners with a small amount of "gate money," ranging from nothing to $200 (Wilson 2007), as well as clothes and transportation back to their county of commitment. Some inmates also accumulate a small amount of savings through in-prison work assignments. However, the release period is often

quite difficult, with many inmates quickly violating parole, experiencing a spell of homelessness, and also experiencing unusually high mortality rates in the weeks and months following release (National Research Council 2008).

There have been several experimental evaluations of transitional cash assistance programs (Mallar and Thornton 1978; Rossi et al. 1980), with one finding substantial effects of providing transitional cash assistance on recidivism and one finding little impact. The latter evaluation also found a large negative effect of the transitional cash assistance on the labor supply of released inmates. In fact, the authors speculate that the lack of an overall impact on recidivism reflected the offsetting effects of the reduction in recidivism due to the cash assistance and the increased criminal activity associated with being idle (Rossi et al. 1980). These experiments were implemented during a time when the incarceration rate was considerably lower (and the average prisoner considerably more criminally inclined relative to today) and involved cash assistance programs that had benefit-reduction rates of 100 percent against legitimate labor market earnings. Certainly, one could create a conditional cash transfer program that did not provide such strong disincentives to work. Moreover, the high parole failure and return-to-custody rates shown in the recent report of the National Research Council (2008) suggest that this immediate transition period is particularly crucial and that transitional cash assistance beyond the meager gate-money allowance might help tremendously.

There have also been several high-quality evaluations of the impact of providing transitional employment to former inmates. The National Supported Work (NSW) Program (recently reanalyzed by Uggen 2000) and the New York Center for Employment Opportunities evaluated by MDRC (Bloom et al. 2007) find some evidence that providing prison releases with transitional employment forestalls recidivism during the 2 years postrelease. However, these

programs found considerable heterogeneity in program impact with the NSW finding significant effects for older releases and the CEO evaluation reporting significant effects for those most recently released from prison. Truth be told, we still have much to learn about the relationship between employment, recidivism, and incarceration for reentering offenders. In particular, researchers need to explore more fully which former prisoners appear to be most responsive to such interventions.

More recent models of service delivery have been built around the idea that successfully reintegrating former inmates requires wraparound services that begin while the individual is still incarcerated and that continue well into the parole terms of the releasee, and if needed, beyond. The programs funded under the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI) serve as examples (Lattimore 2008). SVORI is a multi-agency federal initiative providing grants to localities to provide holistic, complete, and coordinated reentry services that begin prerelease and continue through the parole terms of releasees. While each locality was permitted the leeway to design their own programs, the grants are conditional on certain service elements, including prerelease assessment, the use of reentry plans, the use of transition teams that coordinate release and reentry, efforts to connect reentering men to community resources, and the use of graduated levels of supervision and sanctions. Although the impact evaluation of this effort is still in progress, many believe that this coordinated, continuous process of service delivery, commencing prior to release, is the key to avoiding quick reentry failures.

We are in need of more rigorous evaluations of what works for those released from prison, with an eye on flushing out the differential responsiveness of different types of former prisoners to the interventions and incentives created by these programs. The scale of the problem continues to increase with the continually rising, albeit at a slower rate than in years past, prison

population. Given the social and budgetary costs of crime and incarceration, programs that have even modest effects are likely to pass cost-benefit tests.

Notes

[1] Figures from Bureau of Justice Statistics *Facts at a Glance,* http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/glance/tables/incrttab.htm accessed on July 27 2009.

[2] See Raphael and Stoll (2009) for details behind these tabulations.

[3] These counterfactual crime trends are based on estimates of the joint contemporary incapacitation and deterrence effects presented in Johnson and Raphael (2007).

[4] Certainly the large increase in drug arrests does not entirely reflect changes in offending behavior. We make this assumption to render the decomposition robust to concerns regarding changes in drug offending.

[5] Several demographic changes over this time period would have militated towards lower offending, including the aging of the population, increases in educational attainment, and the increase in the proportion foreign-born.

[6] The figures add up to more than 100 percent due to the fact that some of the children are residing with multiple caregivers.

[7] Glaze and Maruschek (2009) report that 47 percent of male inmates and 64 percent of female inmates were residing with their children right before the arrest leading to their current incarceration spell.

[8] Roughly one-third to two-thirds of inmates are employed at the time of the arrest leading to their current incarceration (See Kling 2006; Petit and Lyons 2007; Tyler and Kling 2007; and Sabol 2007).

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TABLE 1
Comparison of Expected Time Served, Prison Admission Rates, Incarceration Risk per Crime, and Crime Rates for the United States by Type of Criminal Offense, 1984 and 2002

	Expected Value of Time Served in Years		Prison Admissions per 100,000		Crime Rate per 100,000			Prison Admissions per Crime Committed	
	1984	2002	1984	2002	1984	2002	2002 Counter-Factual	1984	2002
Murder	6.49	8.13	5.47	4.98	7.92	5.63	6.95	0.69	0.89
Rape	2.98	5.30	4.35	7.70	35.71	33.11	42.01	0.12	0.23
Robbery	3.13	3.80	12.51	9.97	205.44	146.12	207.38	0.06	0.07
Assault	2.01	2.86	5.00	12.03	290.23	309.54	309.50	0.02	0.04
Other violent	2.30	3.47	1.72	3.53	21.34[a]	35.65[a]	44.45[c]	0.06[e]	0.10[e]
Burglary	1.99	2.48	19.08	14.21	1263.70	747.22	1,034.25	0.02	0.02
Larceny	1.44	2.17	13.93	17.83	2791.30	2,450.72	2,915.05	0.00	0.01
Motor vehicle	1.42	1.87	0.99	2.79	437.11	432.91	564.38	0.00	0.01
Other prop.	1.52	2.49	3.01	4.98	828.26[a]	725.46[a]	904.65[c]	0.00[f]	0.01[f]
Drugs	1.63	2.11	8.73	43.93	264.31[b]	469.68[b]	469.68[d]	0.03	0.09
Other	2.92	2.27	12.45	20.26	138.37[a]	184.18[a]	229.67[c]	0.06[g]	0.07[g]
Parole Violators	1.27	1.44	20.48	80.75	—	—		—	—

Time served estimates come from Raphael and Stoll (2009). Each value is rescaled so that the expected value of time served is equal to the value implied by the national prison release rate for the year described. Prison admissions rates are estimated by applying the distribution of admissions by offense category estimated from the 1984 and 2002 NCRP files to the overall national admissions rates. Crime rates are based on the Uniform Crime Reports unless otherwise noted. Counter-factual crime rates are estimated using crime-specific incapacitation and deterrence effect estimates of incarceration on crime taken from Johnson and Raphael (2007).

[a] Crime rate estimates based on imputed admissions per crime and the observed admissions rates.

[b] Crime rates for drug crimes are equal to the number of adult arrests for drug crimes per 100,000 U.S. residents.

[c] Assumes a 25 percent increase in offending above the 2002 level (equal to the 2002 admissions weighted sum of the predicted increase above 2002 for the seven part 1 offenses).

[d] Set equal to the arrest rate for 2002.

[e] Based on average admissions per crime committed for non-homicide violent crimes by year.

[f] Based on average admissions per crime committed for non-burglary property crimes by year.

[g] Based on the weighted average admissions per crime for all crimes by year.

TABLE 2
Proportion Institutionalized Among U.S. Adult Men, Ages 18 to 55, by Race/Ethnicity, Educational Attainment, and Age, 2007

	All	Non-Hispanic White	Non-Hispanic Black	Non-Hispanic Asian	Hispanic
All	0.024	0.014	0.080	0.006	0.028
Less than high school					
All ages	0.066	0.049	0.190	0.023	0.041
18 to 25	0.080	0.053	0.181	0.041	0.061
26 to 35	0.078	0.064	0.280	0.048	0.043
36 to 45	0.060	0.052	0.200	0.016	0.033
46 to 55	0.039	0.029	0.115	0.010	0.023
High school grad/GED					
All ages	0.029	0.019	0.081	0.010	0.027
18 to 25	0.025	0.016	0.065	0.010	0.024
26 to 35	0.041	0.026	0.118	0.017	0.029
36 to 45	0.032	0.022	0.085	0.006	0.030
46 to 55	0.020	0.013	0.057	0.006	0.023
Some College					
All ages	0.013	0.008	0.039	0.006	0.015
18 to 25	0.007	0.004	0.015	0.004	0.012
26 to 35	0.017	0.011	0.048	0.012	0.018
36 to 45	0.017	0.011	0.051	0.008	0.018
46 to 55	0.012	0.007	0.042	0.003	0.012
College Graduate					
All ages	0.002	0.002	0.011	0.000	0.004
18 to 25	0.001	0.001	0.004	0.001	0.006
26 to 35	0.002	0.001	0.011	0.000	0.002
36 to 45	0.003	0.002	0.013	0.000	0.003
46 to 55	0.003	0.002	0.011	0.001	0.007

Tabulated from the 2007 American Community Survey.

TABLE 3
Proportion of State and Federal Prison Inmates who are the Parents of Minor Children by Gender and Age, 2004

	State Prison Inmates			Federal Prison Inmates		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
All Inmates	0.519	0.512	0.617	0.629	0.634	0.559
24 or less	0.441	0.435	0.554	0.458	0.457	0.475
25 to 34	0.644	0.633	0.807	0.741	0.741	0.745
35 to 44	0.589	0.583	0.657	0.719	0.721	0.682
45 to 54	0.310	0.314	0.258	0.470	0.483	0.312
55 or older	0.126	0.129	—	0.238	0.253	—

Tabulations in this table come from Table 5 of Glaze and Maruschak (2009). Cells with missing data are blank due to insufficient observations in the underlying survey data.

TABLE 4
Cumulative Risk of Paternal Incarceration Among PSID Children Born Between 1968 and 2005 Who Lived With Their Fathers At Least One Year Between Birth and the Final Analysis Year by Race and Father's Education

		Father's Educational Attainment			
	All Children	HS Dropout	HS Grad/GED	High School or Less	Great than High School
Black Children	18.66	32.20	19.51	22.91	9.89
White Children	10.10	23.06	11.57	14.33	5.26

Tabulations come from the analysis of PSID data in Johnson (2009). The figures present the proportion of children in this birth cohort ever observed residing with their fathers who experience a paternal incarceration at some point. Note, the figures do not include paternal incarceration among children who never reside with their fathers.

TABLE 5
Child Family Income and Poverty Rates among Children Born between 1985 and 2000 in the PSID before, during, and after a Paternal Incarceration

	Child's Family Income (1997$)	In Poverty (%)
Year before father's incarceration	$38,960	22.34
Average during incarceration	$30,234	30.87
Year after father's release	$33,100	24.40
Difference (During – Before)	-$8,726	8.53

Tabulations come from the analysis of PSID data in Johnson (2009). Figures are for children born between 1985 and 2000 whose father's are residing with them prior to the paternal incarceration.

TABLE 6
Characteristics of State Prisoners Released in 2003

	All Inmates	White	Black	Hispanic
Demographics				
Male	0.897	0.876	0.907	0.934
White	0.464	1.000	0.000	0.888
Black	0.519	0.000	1.000	0.097
Hispanic	0.202	0.069	0.007	1.000
Educational Attainment				
8th grade or less	0.114	0.124	0.085	0.261
9th grade	0.114	0.111	0.112	0.146
10th grade	0.151	0.130	0.175	0.126
11th grade	0.157	0.116	0.203	0.106
12th/GED	0.386	0.432	0.351	0.328
Some college	0.060	0.065	0.061	0.024
College grad	0.009	0.011	0.010	0.005
Special Ed.	0.007	0.010	0.005	0.004
Age percentiles				
25th	24.7	25.3	24.3	24.3
50th	32.0	33.0	31.7	30.1
75th	39.9	40.5	39.9	37.8
Time Served Percentiles[a] (months)				
25th	11.3	10.6	10.9	14.9
50th	20.8	19.6	21.3	24.0
75th	39.9	36.1	42.0	43.5
Conditionally released	0.739	0.732	0.702	0.856
Prior felony incarceration	0.327	0.292	0.410	0.203
Offense				
Murder/homicide	0.025	0.022	0.026	0.029
Rape/sex assault	0.043	0.058	0.028	0.046
Robbery	0.073	0.046	0.097	0.074
Assault	0.081	0.075	0.078	0.105
Other violent	0.022	0.027	0.017	0.027
Burglary	0.116	0.142	0.097	0.105
Larceny	0.128	0.150	0.120	0.079
Motor vehicle theft	0.024	0.025	0.016	0.041
Other property	0.037	0.046	0.030	0.030
Drugs	0.321	0.249	0.391	0.343
Other	0.128	0.159	0.100	0.121

Tabulated from the 2003 NCRP data base.
[a] Refers to time served for release offense.

FIGURE 1
Prisoners in State or Federal Prison per 100,000 U.S. Residents, 1925 through 2007

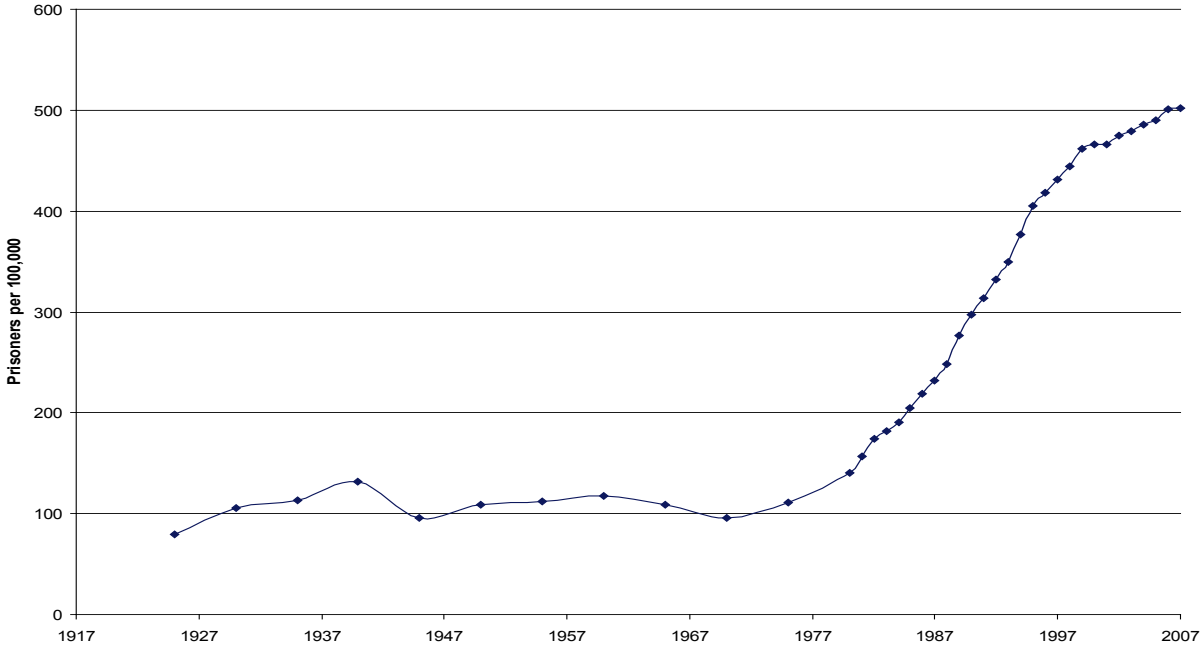
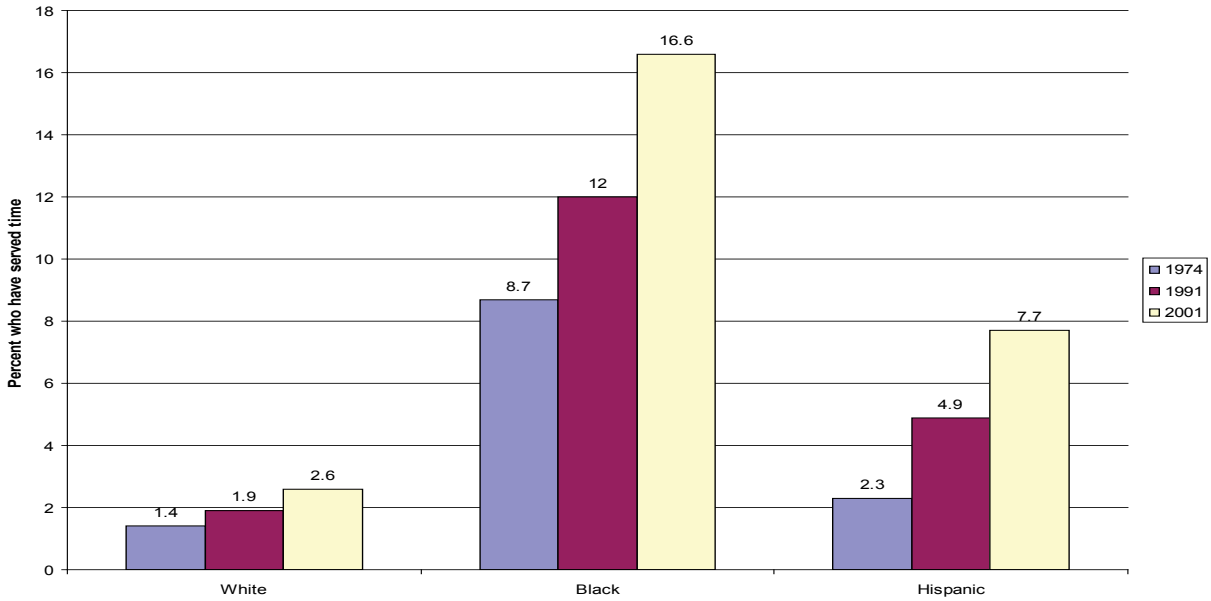
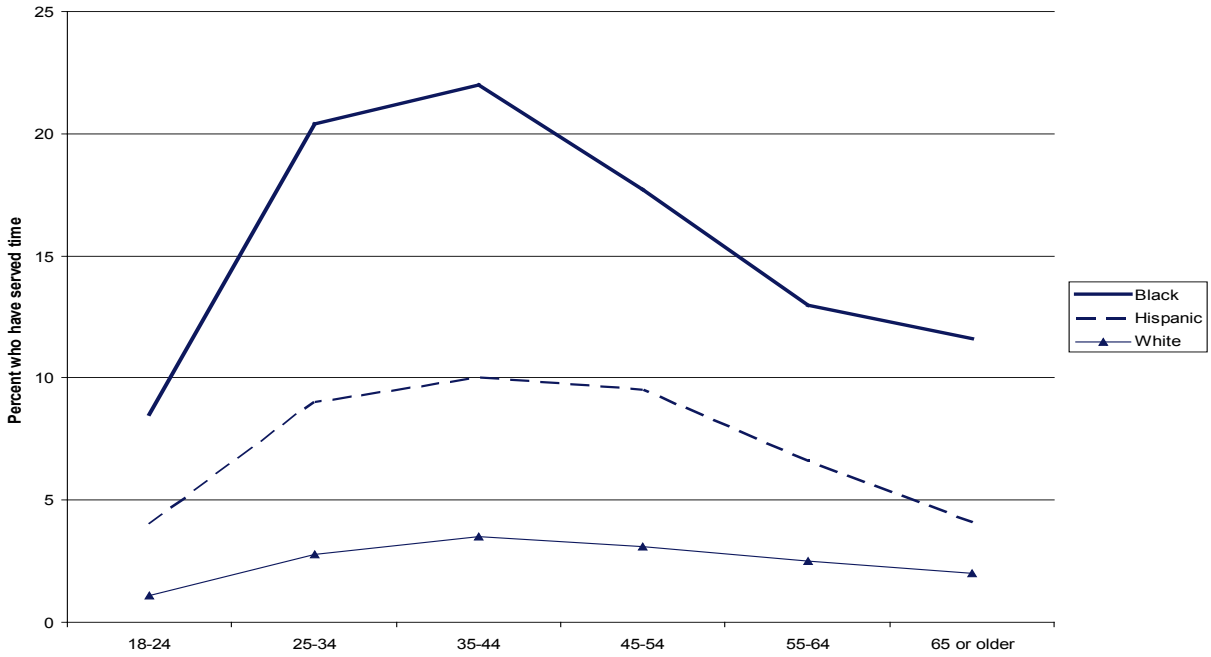


FIGURE 2
Percent of Adult Men Who Have Ever Served Time in a State or Federal Prison by Race/Ethnicity, 1974 through 2001



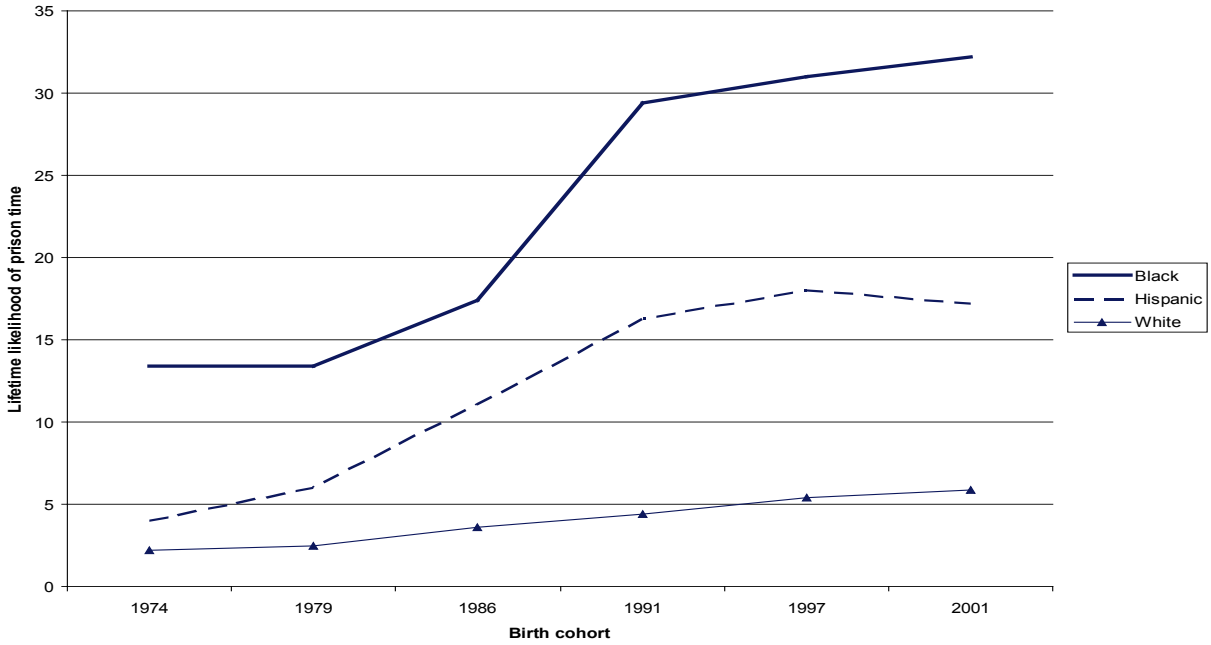
Source: Bonczar 2003.

FIGURE 3
Percent of Adult Men Who Have Ever Served Time in a State or Federal Prison by Race/Ethnicity and Age, 2001



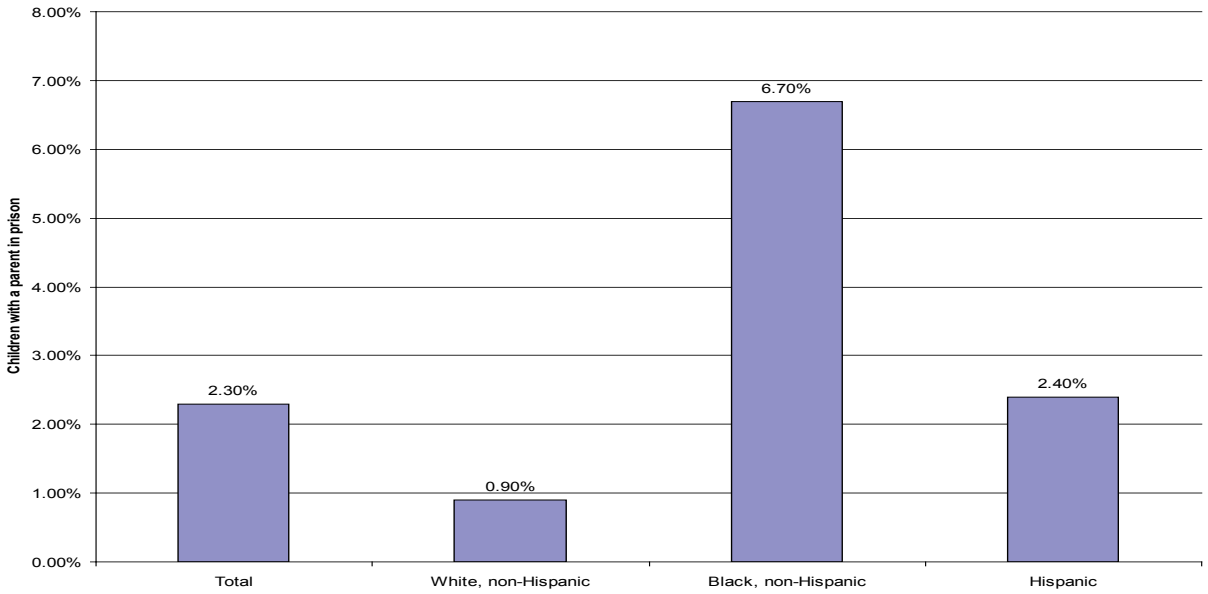
Source: Bonczar 2003.

FIGURE 4
Lifetime Chances of Going to State or Federal Prison by Race/Ethnicity and Birth Year for Men, 1974 through 2001



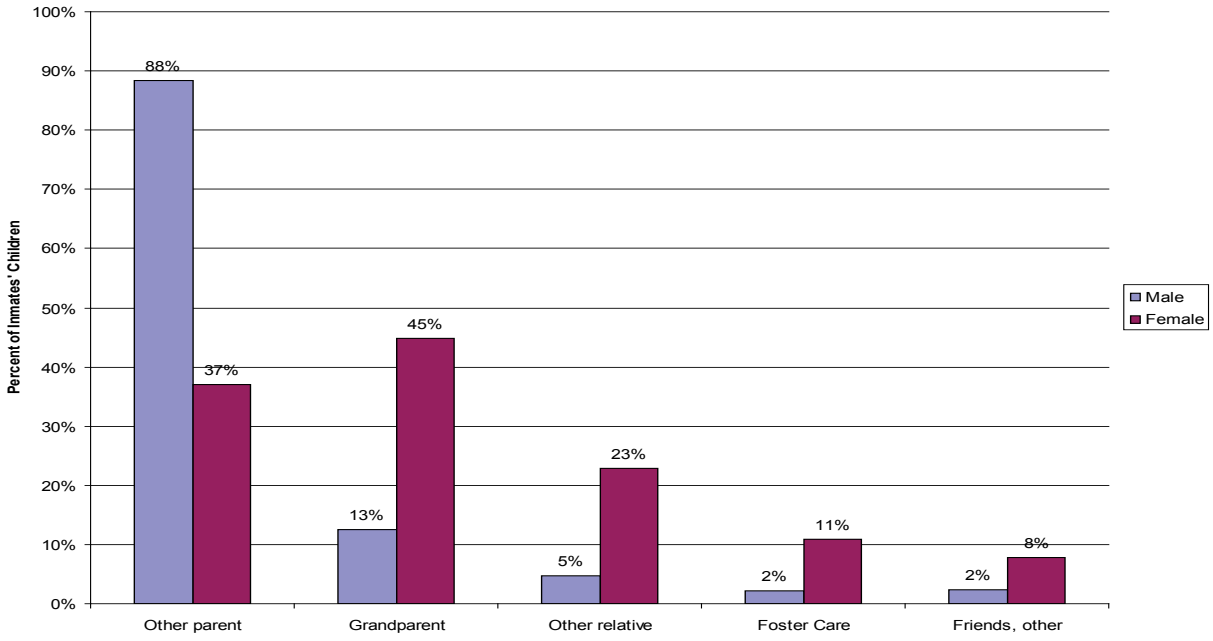
Source: Bonczar 2003.

FIGURE 5
The Percent of Children with a Parent in State or Federal Prison in 2007 by Race/Ethnicity



Source: Glaze and Maruschak (2009).

FIGURE 6
Current Caregiver for Minor Children of Parents in State Prison, 2004



Source: Glaze and Maruschak (2009). Details sum to more than 100% as some prisoners had multiple minor children living with multiple caregivers.

FIGURE 7
The Proportion of Employers Whose Most Recent Hire Was a Black Male by Their Self-Stated Willingness to Hire Ex-Offenders and by Whether They Check Criminal Background in Screening Applicants