

## Incarceration, Marriage and Family Life

The myriad consequences of the prison boom in America are becoming more far-reaching, affecting not only the incarcerated and their families, but also in triggering a major shift in family structure and childrearing.

With the increase in incarceration among low-education black men comes a significant increase in poor minority families forced to deal with the adjustment of an absentee father and partner, and significant readjustment upon their return. In addition, current statistics show a decrease in the pool of black males available for marriage. While much of this is the obvious result of imprisonment itself, researchers believe this may also be attributable to an increasing perception among urban women that this population of men are “high risk,” for reasons stemming from the stigma of imprisonment; perceived risks of repeated criminal behavior; and inability to provide financially.

Much of the research into criminal behavior indicates that marriage, by virtue of its inherent responsibilities and obligations, is to some degree a deterrent to aberrant or criminal behavior. Few studies, however, have explored the effects of incarceration on marriage, the prospect of marriage, or on family.

Bruce Western, Professor of Sociology and Faculty Associate at the Office of Population Research at Princeton University’s Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, addresses these issues in his recently-issued study, titled “Incarceration, Marriage and Family Life,” which constitutes a chapter of a book Western is writing about the causes and effects of increasing incarceration rates in America.

### *Study Description*

Western explores effects of imprisonment on marriage and family, comparing and contrasting hypotheses of selection and incapacitation. The hypothesis of selection purports that men who go to prison are characteristically unstable and lack the ability to develop and maintain stable two-parent families, attributable in part to low education, poor economic status, and weak self-esteem. In this scenario, these men would have weak attachments even if they weren’t incarcerated. In contrast, the hypothesis of incapacitation assumes incarcerated men have close family and community ties upon entering prison. Limitations of incarceration, however, impede prisoners’ ability to maintain those bonds, resulting in increases in divorce and reduced marriages post-release.

Western turns to empirical evidence to unravel these

rival claims. In the case of selection, research finds criminal offenders, especially poor urban black males, exhibit an inability to develop and maintain intimate relationships. Evidence also points to the perception of unreliability and tarnished reputation of this group as characteristics making urban women wary of ex-offender males as potential mates.

*[The] data show that black ex-prisoners are significantly less likely to get married than men who have never been incarcerated.... The effects of incarceration on marriage among whites and Hispanics, on the other hand, were much smaller than those found for black men.*

Researchers supportive of the incapacitation theory point to a major upheaval in communication between prisoner and those “on the outside,” weakening the incarcerated male’s family ties. Given the distance between home and prisons, a small percentage of children visit with their incarcerated father. The primary mode of communication is through telephone and mail. The end result is often times a decreased commitment on the part of incarcerated parents to their children.

Western goes on to establish a baseline for the study calculating first, the number of men entering prison married versus the number of men incarcerated who are not married; and second, the number of children with absentee (both married and unmarried) fathers.

Western utilizes data from two different data sets, the U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), which provides a nationally representative sample of men aged 14 to 21 in 1979, in which men are interviewed annually until 1994, then every other year until 2000; and Fragile Families Survey of Child Wellbeing, conducted by Princeton University’s Center for Research on Child Wellbeing (CRCW) and Columbia

Bruce Western,

Professor of Sociology;

Faculty Associate, Office of Population Research

Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs,

Princeton University

University's Social Indicators Survey Center, which obtains information from 27% of the men while in prison (compared to 7.8 % in the NLSY study) and their partners. While the latter data are comprehensive, Western cautions that the Fragile Families study lacks long-term statistics but does provide a different and valuable perspective.

Both data sets are used to develop a correlation between (1) the number of prisoners who enter prison married and the rate of divorce after they are released, and (2) the number prisoners who are unmarried when they enter prison, and their chances of getting married post-release. Fragile Families data is also used to gauge the effects of former incarceration on women and families in terms of domestic violence.

Western also introduces a number of control variables, or adjustments for factors that are seen to impact the likelihood of marriage or divorce such as differences in race and education, regional differences, religious affiliation, criminal behavior vs. imprisonment, domestic violence, and drug use. For example, imprisonment reduces the marriage rate through the mechanism of economic disadvantage, where reduced employment due to incarceration makes men less attractive marriage partners. If controlling for employment significantly reduces the estimated effects of incarceration, researchers can say that differences in employment between non-inmates and ex-inmates help explain incarceration gap in marriage.

### Findings

Western finds that the incapacitative effects of incarceration make it, not surprisingly, unlikely that men will get married while in prison. After release from prison, the NLSY data show that black ex-prisoners are significantly less likely to get married than men who have never been incarcerated. Much of this difference, however, is statistically explained by the very low rates of employment among black men with prison records. The effects of incarceration on marriage among whites and Hispanics, on the other hand, were much smaller than those found for black men.

Western's analysis of NLSY data on the effects of incarceration on divorce finds the rate of divorce to be higher amongst whites and Hispanics, but negligible among blacks, though Western highlights that a small percentage of blacks are married upon entering prison.

Western's examination of Fragile Families and Child

Wellbeing Study reveals that ex-inmates across the board are more likely to be separated from their wife or partner and their children than non-inmates, the percentage being highest among blacks. Western then uses the data to take this a step further to first, study the number of ex-inmates who are not married at time of their child's birth and those married a year later, and second, the number of former inmates who are married to the mother of their child at time of their child's birth, but separated a year later. Western finds an increase in separation between ex-inmates and the mother of their child during their child's first year of life among whites and Hispanics, and a statistically significant increase among African American males, in contrast to a negligible percentage in found in the NYSE study.

### Policy Implications

Black urban males account for the largest population in America's prisons. Largely unmarried upon entering prison, their chances of marriage post-prison are among the lowest, compared to their Hispanic and white counterparts. While much of this can be attributed to unstable character traits and poor socioeconomic standing, research suggests a strong correlation between joblessness and rate of marriage.

Factors of selection and incapacitation associated with ex-prisoners, namely the stigma associated with having a prison record, low self-esteem, poor economic standing, lack of or deteriorated support systems, inability to find adequate employment, etc. affect both single and married felons' own perceptions, and sharply colors that of women, positioning these men as "undesirable."

Western's findings support the need for improved educational and vocational initiatives in urban areas before men are inclined to criminal behavior. His findings also point to the need for the establishment of out-placement mechanisms within the prison system.

A copy of the policy brief can be found at :  
[http://www.wws.princeton.edu/policybriefs/western\\_implications.pdf](http://www.wws.princeton.edu/policybriefs/western_implications.pdf)

The website for the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs:  
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For media inquiries or a copy of the complete paper, please contact:  
Steven Barnes, (Ph.) 609.731.5094,  
email: [sbarnes@princeton.edu](mailto:sbarnes@princeton.edu)