

## Fathers' Incarceration, Family Instability, and Child Wellbeing

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### Extended Abstract

This paper uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study to examine relationships between parental incarceration and family wellbeing.

### Theoretical Focus

Incarceration is widespread in the United States, and previous literature has shown significant negative effects of incarceration on later employment, earnings, and relationship stability. Each of these outcomes places children at considerable risk when a parent is incarcerated. Moreover, the challenges documented in post-prison re-entry (particularly in the labor market), the stigma associated with incarceration, and the physical and emotional barriers to visiting a parent in prison suggest that parental incarceration may have more scarring effects on children than even other forms of parental absence. However, little is known about the effects of parental incarceration on children.

### Data and Methods

The Fragile Families study follows a cohort of nearly 5,000 couples with children born between 1998 and 2000 in twenty large U.S. cities, with an oversample of unmarried parents. The study surveys both mothers and fathers at the time of their child's birth, with follow-up surveys conducted when the children are one, three, and five years old. The study was initially designed to address three areas of interest – nonmarital childbearing, the role of fathers, and welfare reform – and their effects on family formation and children's wellbeing. It has since expanded to further examine the roles of social and material disadvantage.

Fragile Families' focus on nonmarital births provides a sample facing significant disadvantage, and incarceration is quite prevalent among the Fragile Families parents, particularly the unmarried fathers. By the third-year survey, more than 50% of unwed fathers, and 13% of married fathers, have experienced incarceration. Maternal incarceration rates were far lower (8% among unwed mothers and 2% among married mothers at the third-year follow-up) so this analysis focuses on fathers' incarceration. We examine fathers' labor market performance and the levels of material hardship and family instability facing mothers, who are most often the custodial parent. Finally, we examine children's health, mental health, and cognitive development when they are three years old.

Where data are missing, as is often the case both in longitudinal surveys, and in the study of individuals' criminal histories, responses are imputed using multiple imputation. Multiple

imputation creates a set of complete datasets, predicting unknown values, and the likelihood of values to be missing, based on observed data. Unlike other imputation strategies (e.g. complete case analysis, imputing with a single value, or single regression imputation), multiple imputation injects a degree of uncertainty that closely resembles that in the observed survey responses.

Outcomes are then compared using a regression analysis that combines the multiple imputed datasets, and adjusts for parents' race, age at the child's birth, level of education, and level of impulsivity. First, we compare children whose fathers have been incarcerated to their counterparts whose fathers have never been incarcerated. In addition, we perform a more limited analysis that compares fathers' incarceration to other forms of parental absence. We compare those fathers incarcerated for a portion of the three years since their child's birth to two groups of other absent fathers: those fathers who have been consistently nonresident (not living with their partners at any of the three survey waves) and the smaller subset of fathers who have not seen their children in the three years since their birth.

### Incarceration in Fragile Families and Family Instability

The incarceration histories of Fragile Families fathers begin at an early age; more than half report having been incarcerated by age 20. However, the vast majority (86%) have also spent some time in prison or jail during the focal child's lifetime, suggesting that the experience may have led to significant parent-child separation or other family instability (e.g. loss of child support, etc.) Incarceration is particularly prevalent among minority fathers; 51% of the black fathers in the Fragile Families sample, and 37% of Hispanic fathers, have some incarceration history, while only 26% of white fathers and 30% of other fathers do.

Children whose fathers have been incarcerated face unique risks. Upon their release, their fathers are significantly less likely to be employed, work significantly fewer weeks less out of the year, and earn significantly less, both per hour and overall, than their never-incarcerated counterparts. They are also significantly less likely to live with or be married to the mothers of their children. Accordingly, mothers whose partners have been incarcerated are significantly more likely to experience material hardship (e.g. hunger or the inability to pay bills), and are more reliant on public assistance programs such as TANF or food stamps. These mothers also move more frequently, subjecting their children to residential instability as well.

### Fathers' Incarceration and Child Development

Despite a large and significant relationship between fathers' incarceration and family instability, incarceration appears to play a smaller role in child development, at least by the time children are three years old. Children whose fathers have been incarcerated rate significantly higher than their counterparts on two of three measures of mental health problems (aggression and anxiety/depression). However, the two groups are statistically indistinguishable on measures of withdrawal, and on measures of child health and cognitive development.

We expect, however, that differences between the two groups will emerge as the children grow older, for two key reasons. First, development is difficult to measure precisely when the children are as young as three years old. Moreover, the effects of material disadvantage on child wellbeing tend to be cumulative, and we therefore expect that the financial instability, material hardship, and frequent residential moves associated with their fathers' incarceration will have a greater effect on children as they age.

## Fathers' Incarceration and Other Forms of Father Absence

To examine the role of incarceration in shaping family structure, we perform a more limited comparison, limiting our analysis to those fathers who were in jail or prison at some time after their child was born. We compare these fathers to other fathers who were absent from their child's life (defining absent fathers both as those who had not lived with their child at any survey wave, and as a more limited subset who had not seen their child since his or her birth).

The differences between incarcerated and other nonresident fathers are smaller than those in the broader "ever versus never incarcerated" comparison. However, several differences persist. Fathers with a recent incarceration (ie., since their child's birth) perform significantly worse in the labor market than those fathers who had been consistently nonresident, and their families experience significantly more hardship and residential instability. Comparing recently incarcerated fathers to the subset of absent fathers who have never seen their children yields differences in the same direction, but of slightly smaller magnitude and statistically insignificant. (The lack of significance may be a result of the small number of the most absent fathers.)

Differences in child wellbeing remain substantively similar in the more narrow comparisons, but shrink slightly in magnitude and lose statistical significance. Nonetheless, as with the binary incarceration analysis, we expect that as the children grow up, developmental indicators are more precisely measured, and the effects of disadvantage accumulate, the children of incarcerated fathers will diverge from their counterparts, even those whose fathers were absent for other reasons.