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# Mass Incarceration and Employment

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## Notes

The conference, “Measuring Globalization,” was cosponsored by the Upjohn Institute and the Progressive Policy Institute and funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation.

1. Yao, Ma, and Pei (2013) illustrate the challenges of estimating the import content of exports in China’s huge processing sector, and Ahmad (2013) describes initiatives be taken by OECD to improve the quality of data in world I-O tables.

2. This figure is based on the author’s calculations using the WIOD.

3. Timmer et al. (2013) focus on competitiveness measures for manufactured products because data on I-O relationships for services industries are relatively crude in most countries.

4. Figures are author’s calculations based on the WIOD.

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Ahmad, Nadim. 2013. “Measuring Trade in Value Added, and Beyond.” Paper presented at the conference “Measuring the Effects of Globalization,” held in Washington, DC, February 28–March 1.

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# Mass Incarceration and Employment

*This is an excerpt from a forthcoming Upjohn Press book, The New Scarlet Letter? Negotiating the U.S. Labor Market with a Criminal Record, by Steven Raphael. To preorder the book, visit [www.upjohn.org/Publications/Titles/TheNewScarletLetter](http://www.upjohn.org/Publications/Titles/TheNewScarletLetter).*

In 2011, nearly 700,000 people were released from either a state or federal prison. These releases added to the roughly 6 million adults who have served prison time in the past. Many will experience a host of difficulties upon reentering noninstitutional society. Those with minor children (especially incarcerated men) often accumulate substantial back child-support obligations while incarcerated and face the legal requirement to pay down the balance. Many face precarious housing situations and a high risk of homelessness following release. Most have little in the way of assets and receive a very small amount of “gate money” upon release, usually no more than a few hundred dollars. Many will be returned to custody for either parole violations or for a new felony offense. In light of these problems and the sheer numbers of individuals released from our prisons each year, policymakers at all levels of government are increasingly focused on how to foster and support the successful reentry of former prison inmates.

For a myriad of reasons, stable employment is of central importance to the successful reentry of former inmates into society. To start, the material well being of most released inmates depends principally on what they can earn in the labor market. The U.S. social safety net provides little by way of public assistance for the nonworking poor, especially for able-bodied and nonelderly men. Thus, avoiding material poverty requires gainful employment.

Second, economic research has demonstrated that the likelihood of

committing crime depends to some extent on having something to lose. Those with good jobs and good employment prospects in the legitimate labor market tend to commit less crime. Those with poor employment prospects tend to commit more. Higher criminal participation among those with low earnings may be driven by the need to generate income to meet basic needs, a sense that the potential losses associated with being caught and punished are low when legitimate job opportunities are rare, or a general sense of not playing a meaningful role outside of prison. Regardless of the causal avenue, the transition to stable employment is often characterized as a key determinant of desistance from criminal activity and the

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process of disentangling oneself from the criminal justice system.

Third, most released male inmates are of an age where they are firmly attached to the labor force and where conventional norms regarding responsible adult behavior prescribe steady legitimate work and supporting one’s dependents. Facilitating “buy in” among former inmates into conventional society requires that they be afforded the opportunity to transition into the standard roles of other law-abiding citizens.

Finally, formal employment provides daily structure and a sense of purpose for many—factors that may prevent further criminal activity. Criminologists have studied in-depth the “incapacitation effect” of prison—that is, the extent to which prisons reduce crime by forcibly segregating the criminally active. Of course, many other activities incapacitate criminal activity, if we interpret the

word *incapacitation* broadly. Schools tend to reduce the criminal activity of youth by keeping them busy during the day. Marriage tends to incapacitate the criminal activity of young men as the accompanying newfound responsibilities and activities supplant more crime-prone settings and pursuits. Extending the metaphor to the labor market, having something to do during the day that generates legitimate income leaves less time for committing crime. Moreover, daily exposure to coworkers who are more firmly attached to legitimate work and less involved in crime may provide an alternative set of positive role models who demonstrate how to live one's life within the bounds of the law.

Unfortunately, the employment prospects of many former inmates upon leaving prison are bleak. Moreover, most face many challenges specific to former prisoners that are likely to hamper their labor market prospects for years to come. Of paramount importance are the characteristics of former inmates themselves. Those who serve time in prison are far from a representative cross-section of the U.S. adult population. Inmates, and former inmates, are disproportionately male, have very low levels of formal educational attainment, are disproportionately minority, have unstable employment histories, and often have a history of substance abuse problems. In addition, the prevalence of severe mental illness is quite high. Independent of having a criminal record, most of these characteristics are predictive of poor employment outcomes in the U.S. labor market in their own right.

These factors are compounded by the general wariness of employers and the stigma associated with a criminal history and having served time in a prison. A consistent finding in surveys of employers is a strong reluctance to hire an applicant with a criminal history, and an increasing tendency of employers to either directly ask an applicant about one's history or to use third-party firms to conduct more formal and thorough background checks.

In this book I explore the labor market prospects of the growing population

of former prison inmates in the United States. In particular, I document the specific challenges created by the characteristics of this population and the common hiring and screening practices of U.S. employers. In addition, I discuss various policy efforts to improve the employment prospects and limit the future criminal activity of former prison inmates either by improving the skills and qualifications of these job seekers or through the provision of incentives to employers to hire such individuals.

### The Scale and Scope of Incarceration in the United States

Table 1 presents estimates combining data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) and the U.S. Census Bureau of the proportion of adults aged 18–65 in 2007 who were incarcerated on any given day. The table displays figures for adults in this age range by gender and by broad racial/ethnic groups to highlight some of the key disparities. Slightly more than 2 percent of men are incarcerated on any given day, with roughly 80 percent of these men in a state or federal prison. The percentage of women incarcerated is much smaller by comparison (0.2 percent). Table 1 also reveals enormous racial and ethnic disparities in the proportion incarcerated, with the percentage of black males in prison or jail on any given day more than seven times the figure for white males, and the percentage for Hispanic males roughly

two and a half times that of white males. The ordering of the racial differential among women is similar, though the disparities are muted relative to what we see among men.

Perhaps a more relevant way to characterize the scope of incarceration for the purposes of understanding the consequences for the U.S. labor market is to discuss the proportion of individuals who at some point in their lives have served time in prison or will serve time in prison. Such a characterization would help us understand the extent and dimensions of the subpopulation of U.S. adults who have been physically removed from the workforce and that now have a prison spell on record for the remainder of their work careers. Fortunately, the BJS has produced such figures for broad categories of U.S. adults, while independent researchers have produced estimates for specific subgroups of interest.

Figure 1 presents BJS estimates of the percentage of adult men in the United States who have served time in a state or federal prison in 2001, as well as the projected chance that a male child born in 2001 will serve prison time at some point in his life. Naturally, both estimates are much larger than the percentage of men incarcerated on any given day. For example, 2.6 percent of white men have served prison time at some point in their lives, while the figures in Table 1 indicate that on any given day only 0.7 percent of white men are in prison. Over 16 percent

**Table 1 Percentage of Adults Aged 18–65 Incarcerated in 2007, by Gender and Race/Ethnicity**

	Incarcerated in any institution	Incarcerated in a county jail	Incarcerated in a state prison	Incarcerated in a federal prison
All men	2.2	0.7	1.3	0.2
Non-Hispanic white	1.1	0.4	0.7	0.1
Non-Hispanic black	7.9	2.5	4.7	0.8
Hispanic	2.7	0.9	1.5	0.3
Non-Hispanic other	1.1	0.3	0.6	0.1
All Women	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.0
Non-Hispanic white	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.0
Non-Hispanic black	0.6	0.3	0.3	0.0
Hispanic	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.0
Non-Hispanic other	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0

SOURCE: Raphael and Stoll (2013).

of African-American men have served time in prison, while 5.5 percent are incarcerated on any given day.

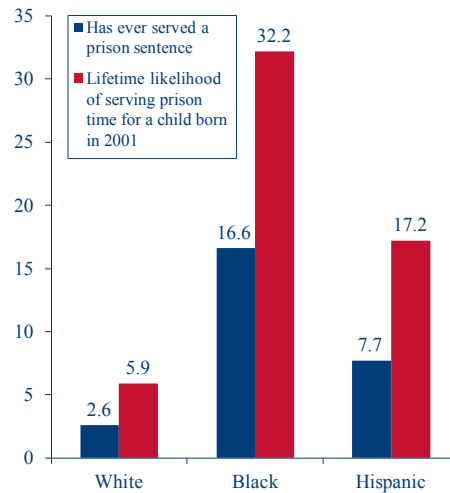
The BJS estimates of the lifetime chances of serving prison time are truly staggering. The estimates indicate that fully one-third of African-American male children born in 2001 can expect to serve time in prison at some point in their lives. The comparable figures for Hispanics and whites are 17.2 and 5.9 percent, respectively.

Figure 2 presents comparable results for women. Again, we see much lower rates for women relative to men, yet higher percentages ever serving time than are incarcerated in prisons on any given day. Black women are by far the most likely to have done time and face the highest chances of a prison spell at some point in their lives. The absolute disparities between women of different race and ethnicity, however, are much smaller than what we observe among men.

To be sure, these estimates mask enormous differences that exist when we split the population along various additional dimensions. The growing incarceration rate coupled with the documented fact that people are most criminally active during their teens and early twenties means that younger generations in the United States coming of age during the prison boom face much higher risks of serving prison time than older generations. Pettit and Western (2004) estimate that roughly one-fifth of black men born between 1965 and 1969 served prison time by 1999, a figure roughly four percentage points higher than the figure for black men overall. As this birth cohort was roughly 30–34 years of age in 1999 and younger on average than the average adult black male in this year, this fact implies that the prevalence of a past prison spell is higher among younger African-American males compared to older African-American males.

Moreover, there are enormous disparities in the proportion that have ever been to prison by educational attainment. High school dropouts are the most likely to have done time, with male high school dropouts, particularly black male high school dropouts, having

**Figure 1: Percentage of U.S. Adult Men That Have Ever Been Incarcerated in a State or Federal Prison and the Lifetime Likelihood of Going to Prison for a Male Child Born in 2001**



SOURCE: Bonczar (2003).

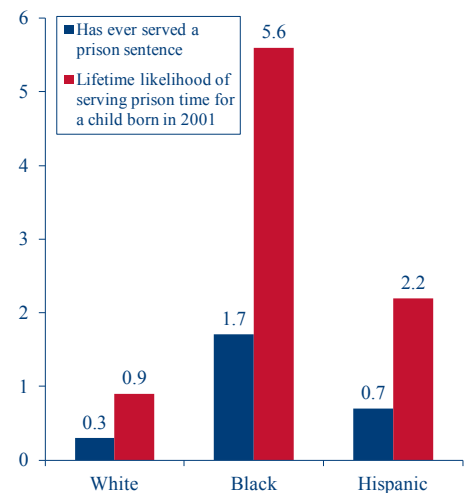
a particularly high incidence of prior prison incarcerations. For the birth cohort that Pettit and Western (2004) study, the authors find that nearly 60 percent of black male high school dropouts served prison time by their early thirties. In some of my own research on California, I found that nearly 90 percent of the state’s black male high school dropouts had served prison time by the end of the 1990s (Raphael 2006).

On any given day, a small minority of the adult population is incarcerated in the nation’s prisons and jails. However, the population that has ever served time or that will serve time is considerably larger. The large racial disparities and the disparities in incarceration rates by educational attainment that we have briefly touched upon suggest that the particular handicap of a prior prison record disproportionately impacts those who are already at a disadvantage in the U.S. labor market. Hence, the incidence of criminal justice involvement in the United States may be aggravating already existing inequities.

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**Figure 2: Percentage of U.S. Adult Women That Have Ever Been Incarcerated in a State or Federal Prison and the Lifetime Likelihood of Going to Prison for a Female Child Born in 2001**



SOURCE: Bonczar (2003).

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