



FRAGILE FAMILIES RESEARCH BRIEF

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Incarceration and the Bonds Among Parents

Background

The U.S. Bureau of the Census recently reported that the number of single mothers in the United States has grown nearly 200 percent since 1970 and that in 1998, 9.8 million mothers were unmarried. At the same time, the male prison population has increased from 200,000 inmates in 1974 to 1.3 million by 2001. Because incarceration is disproportionately concentrated among young, poor, minority men, the growth in the penal population may explain some of the rise in single-motherhood, particularly among the disadvantaged.

This research brief uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Survey [See box, back cover] to answer the following questions:

- ◆ How important are reporting bias and survey non-response in studies of male incarceration?
- ◆ Are relationships between parents less stable if the father has a history of incarceration?
- ◆ Are there racial and ethnic differences in the association between relationship stability and incarceration?

Reporting Bias and Survey Non-Response

One of the unique features of the Fragile Families survey is that both mothers and fathers are interviewed. Having two separate reports of the father's incarceration history allows us to reduce the impact of two problems that typically plague studies of incarceration: reporting bias (under reporting) and survey non-response. In most studies of incarceration, reporting bias probably reduces the

estimated impact of incarceration because men who have been incarcerated are incorrectly included in the comparison group, making the set of men who have been incarcerated look more like the men who were not incarcerated. Ever-incarcerated men are also frequently missed in social surveys because they are often unemployed and may have many temporary residences. Missing these men, a problem called survey non-response, produces incorrect estimates of an incarceration effect, as many of the men most affected by incarceration are not interviewed. Because the Fragile Families survey collects information on

Table 1: Percentage Distribution of Men who Have Served Time in Prison or Jail

Mother's Report	Father's Report			
	Non-Interview	No Prison/Jail	Prison/Jail	Total
African American				
Non-Interview	0.0%	4.8%	6.0%	3.8%
No-Prison/Jail	59.7	76.0	31.9	66.5
Prison/Jail	40.3	19.2	62.1	29.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	432	1170	235	1837
Hispanic				
Non-Interview	0.0%	2.1%	2.7%	1.8%
No-Prison/Jail	70.6	81.3	27.4	75.7
Prison/Jail	29.4	16.6	69.9	22.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	187	797	73	1057
Non-African American Non-Hispanic				
Non-Interview	0.0%	2.1%	4.3%	1.4%
No-Prison/Jail	80.7	90.9	28.0	83.6
Prison/Jail	19.3	7.9	67.7	15.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	119	751	93	963

Table 2: Means of Independent Variables for Regression Analysis by Incarceration Status

Variable	Full Sample	Ever Incarcerated	
		Yes	No
Married at Baseline	.273	.085	.345
Cohabiting at Baseline	.382	.441	.360
First Birth	.387	.353	.401
Father's Characteristics			
Black	.476	.593	.431
Hispanic	.274	.243	.286
White	.206	.133	.234
Other	.044	.031	.049
Age	28	27	29
Less Than HS	.309	.419	.275
HS education	.341	.394	.320
Some College	.235	.174	.258
College Graduate	.115	.013	.154
Worked Last Year	.819	.762	.841
Will Compromise	.535	.437	.574
Expresses Affection	.778	.716	.803
Insults/Criticizes	.968	.955	.973
Encourages	.731	.649	.763
Abuses Drugs/Alcohol	.166	.267	.127
Violent When Angry	.032	.051	.024
Mother's Characteristics			
Black	.459	.565	.419
Hispanic	.270	.234	.283
White	.231	.174	.252
Other	.040	.026	.046
Age	25	24	26
Less Than HS	.320	.428	.279
HS education	.303	.350	.285
Some College	.256	.201	.277
College Graduate	.121	.021	.159
N	3867	1070	2797

fathers' incarceration status from mothers as well as from fathers, we are able to identify the potential reporting problems in other studies of incarcerated men.

Table 1 compares mothers' and fathers' responses to a question on fathers' incarceration - broken out by the race/ ethnicity of the father. Interestingly, between 8 and 19 percent of mothers report that the father has previously been incarcerated while the father claims that he has not, suggesting reporting bias could be large. Of course it is difficult to know how accurate the mother's

information is when, for about 30 percent of cases, the mother reports that the father has never been incarcerated while the father states that he has been.

Table 1 also shows that as many as 40 percent of the African American fathers not interviewed for the Fragile Families survey have been incarcerated at some point in their lives. The rates of incarceration among Hispanic and non-Hispanic white men who were not interviewed are 29 and 19 percent, respectively. Overall, mothers report that almost 34 percent of the non-interviewed fathers have ever been incarcerated. In comparison, mothers report that 24 percent of fathers who have completed an interview have ever spent time in jail or prison. If the men who were not interviewed for the Fragile Families survey represent the "typical" proportion of survey non-response, then many social surveys are missing a substantial proportion of incarcerated men.

Differences between Incarcerated and Non-Incarcerated Fathers

Table 2 lists differences in the observable characteristics of fathers in the Fragile Families survey by their incarceration status¹. Ever-incarcerated men are much less likely to be married or cohabiting with the mother of their child at the time of the child's birth than are never-incarcerated men (53 percent vs. 71 percent). In addition, men with a history of incarceration are more likely to be African American and less likely to be white than are never-incarcerated men. The Fragile Families data indicate that men who have a history of incarceration have lower education levels at the birth of their child. Eighty-one percent of incarcerated fathers had a high school education or less at the time of the birth. In comparison, 60 percent of fathers who have not been incarcerated have a high school education or less. Part of this difference may be explained by the relative youth of ever-incarcerated fathers: on average, they are two years younger than the non-incarcerated fathers. The Fragile Families survey includes a series of questions on the relationship skills of the fathers. Mothers are asked if the father is willing to compromise when there is a disagreement, if he expresses affection, if he insults or criticizes her ideas, and if he encourages her with things that she thinks are important. Fathers who have been incarcerated are less likely to compromise and are less encouraging than non-incarcerated fathers. Incarcerated fathers are also more than twice as likely to abuse alcohol or drugs (27 percent versus 13 percent) and are more than twice as likely to be violent when angry. Over

¹ We identify a father as having been incarcerated if either the mother or father reports that he was incarcerated

Table 3: Estimates of the Marginal Effects of Incarceration on the Probabilities of Cohabitation and Marriage

Sample:	Cohabitation		Marriage		N
	Predicted Probability	Incarceration Effect	Predicted Probability	Incarceration Effect	
Full Father Sample	.284	-.055 (.019)	.079	-.029 (.009)	3410
African American Fathers	.258	-.022 (.024)	.043	-.020 (.008)	1641
White Fathers	.206	-.086 (.037)	.145	-.062 (.035)	870
Hispanic Fathers	.328	-.085 (.038)	.120	-.023 (.024)	899

Note: All models control for relationship at baseline, education of couple, first birth, father's employment, relationship skills, drug and alcohol abuse, and violence. Whites are defined as non-African American, non-Hispanics. Predicted probabilities give the probability of cohabitation/marriage vs. non-residence. Predicted probabilities are calculated for non-resident, never-incarcerated fathers. (Standard errors in parentheses.)

five percent of the ever-incarcerated fathers have hit or slapped the mother when angry compared to two percent of non-incarcerated fathers.

Association between Male Incarceration and Relationship Stability

Results from the Fragile Families survey suggest that ever-incarcerated men are less likely to co-reside with the mother of their child 12 months after the birth than never-incarcerated men. The first row of Table 3 shows the difference in relationship stability between ever-incarcerated and never-incarcerated fathers using the entire sample. This table shows that if a couple was not co-residing at the birth of their child and if the father has never been incarcerated, the probability that they will cohabit twelve months later is 28 percent. If the father has been incarcerated, however, the probability of cohabiting is six percentage points or 19 percent less. Similarly, these data show that eight percent of couples that were not cohabiting (with a non-incarcerated father) at the birth of their child are married 12 months later. If the father was ever-incarcerated, however, the probability is only five percent.

The second panel of Table 3 shows the differences in the probability of co-residence by the race/ethnicity of the father. Interestingly, marriage is relatively rare for African American fathers: only four percent of non-co-resident parents are married 12 months later. If the father was ever-incarcerated, however, the

couple is two percentage points (46 percent) less likely to marry. The association between incarceration and cohabitation is not statistically distinguishable for African American fathers. The association for white fathers is consistent for both marriage and cohabitation. Ever-incarcerated men are 43 percent less likely to marry and 42 percent less likely to cohabit compared to men who have never been incarcerated. Finally, among Hispanic fathers, incarceration is not associated with the probability of marriage, but is associated with a 26 percent decline in the probability of cohabitation.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

Many social surveys of men's incarceration history suffer from reporting bias and survey non-response. Eleven percent of the mothers in our study report that the

father of their child has been incarcerated in the past while the father reports that he has not. In addition, mothers report that over one-third of all men who were not interviewed (19 percent of the total sample) have been incarcerated. Because reporting bias is so large and so many incarcerated men are not surveyed, our results suggest that others surveys on the effects of incarceration are likely to be biased.

These results show that ever-incarcerated fathers are very different from never-incarcerated fathers. They are more likely to be African American, less educated, young, prone to drug and alcohol abuse, and more likely to have poor relationship skills and to be violent. These findings also suggest a strong association between incarceration history and the stability of parents' relationships at the time of their child's birth and 12 months later. Couples who are non-co-resident and in which the father has a history of incarceration are about 37 percent less likely to be married and 19 percent less likely to be cohabiting 12 months after the birth of the child than similar couples in which the father has never been incarcerated.

The Fragile Families data indicate that incarceration policy may result in reduced marriage rates. Given that marriage can serve as an important step away from a life of crime, incarceration policy since 1980 may have undermined the crime-preventing effects of marriage. The question is whether the benefits of marriage associated with lower incarceration rates outweigh the gain in public safety obtained by incapacitating criminals.