TOGETHER DESPITE THE ODDS: RELATIONSHIP RESILIENCE FOLLOWING INCARCERATION IN THE UNITED STATES

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Abstract:

In recent decades, the United States has seen a growing number of disproportionately black or Hispanic men and women whose romantic partnerships have been strained or severed by a period of incarceration. Using a national sample of individuals who had a marital or non-marital cohabitating relationship interrupted by an incarceration spell, we examine the effects of race/ethnicity, marriage, having a child together, length of time together, and incarceration length on the continuation versus dissolution of a romantic partnership following incarceration. Cox proportional hazard models reveal that blacks have significantly higher hazards of relationship dissolution following incarceration than whites and Hispanics. Results also suggest that being married, having a child together, a longer relationship duration, and a shorter incarceration spell may protect against relationship dissolution and that these factors account, in part, for the greater risk of dissolution among blacks relative to whites and Hispanics.
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Six in ten African American men born in the late 1960s who did not finish high school went to prison by their early thirties (Pettit & Western 2004). Over the same time period, marriage rates among less-educated black women were cut in half (Ellwood & Jencks 2004). Rising rates of incarceration and falling rates of marriage among the most disadvantaged demographic groups in the United States have led to a growing number of disproportionately black or Hispanic men and women (Travis et al. 2014) whose romantic partnerships—more often involving cohabitation than marriage—have been strained or severed by an incarceration.

While a stay in prison or jail could provide an opportunity to rebuild ties with loved ones (Edin et al. 2004; Giordano 2010), large-scale longitudinal studies consistently find that incarceration is associated with an increased risk of divorce (Apel et al. 2010; Lopoo & Western 2005; Massoglia et al. 2011; Siennick et al. 2014) and cohabitation dissolution (Apel 2016; Geller 2013; Turney 2015b; Turney & Wildeman 2013; Western 2006). A few of these studies are also informative about the mechanisms underlying this association. Incarceration is stigmatizing for the individuals who experience it as well as for their partner or spouse (Comfort 2008; Uggen et al. 2006). In addition, the partner left behind is burdened financially and emotionally (Travis & Waul 2003; Wildeman et al. 2012) and periods of physical separation make it difficult to maintain strong relationships (Christian 2005; Massoglia et al. 2011; Siennick et al. 2014).

Although prior research provides strong support for an effect of incarceration on relationship disruption, at least two gaps in the literature deserve further attention. First, few studies have examined the circumstances under which incarceration does not lead to the breakup of a romantic partnership. This is surprising given that almost half of all marital and cohabiting unions remain intact in the years immediately after incarceration (Siennick et al. 2014; Turney, 2015b). Given that romantic partnerships have been shown to protect individuals from further involvement in crime (e.g., Horney et al. 1995; King et al. 2007; Sampson et al. 2006), it is important to know which couples are most likely to remain together throughout the incarceration and thereafter. Second, few studies have examined racial and ethnic differences in relationship dissolution following incarceration despite calls from scholars to investigate this issue (Massoglia 2008; Sampson 2011; Western 2006; Western & Wildeman 2009). Race and ethnicity are associated not only with incarceration, but also with family formation and dissolution processes (Bulanda & Brown 2007; Lichter et al. 1992; Manning & Smock 1995), and the intersection of race, family, and incarceration has implications for the reproduction of inequality in the United States (McLanahan & Percheski 2008).

Using a national sample of individuals who were coresiding with a marital or non-marital romantic partner during the month leading up to their incarceration, the purposes of this project are to: 1) examine racial/ethnic differences in the continuation of a romantic relationship following a partner’s incarceration, 2) examine predictors of relationship continuation among previously incarcerated individuals, and 3) examine whether these predictors explain any race differences in relationship dissolution. In doing so, we draw on social exchange theory (Levinger 1965, 1976; Rusbult 1980), a prominent framework for understanding relationship dissolution (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott 2007; Previti & Amato 2003) that has been used in prior research.
examining mechanisms of the effect of incarceration on marital dissolution (Siennick et al. 2014).

BACKGROUND

SOCIAL EXCHANGE PERSPECTIVE

A social exchange perspective for explaining why romantic relationships either break up or remain intact emphasizes investments, exit barriers, and potential alternatives (Levinger 1965, 1976; Rusbult 1980). Relationship-specific investments represent the costs of a relationship relative to its rewards, such as the time and energy it takes to learn and adapt to a partner’s tastes and quirks, which are investments that would no longer pay off if the relationship ended (England & Kilbourne 1990). Exit barriers include characteristics that deter partners from ending a relationship even if it is poor quality, such as when only one partner specializes in paid work making it difficult for the other partner to leave. Potential alternatives reflect the attractiveness of other available partners or of having no partner at all. Thus, the greater the investments and more challenging the barriers to exiting a relationship relative to the attractiveness of potential alternatives, the less likely it is to end (Poortman & Mills 2012; Previti & Amato 2003).

Among couples experiencing the incarceration of a partner, there are at least three indicators of investments and barriers that prior research suggests should be associated with relationship continuity: 1) being married, 2) the duration of the relationship prior to the incarceration, and 3) having a child together. In addition, we propose that 4) longer spells of incarceration limit investments, remove exit barriers, and increase the attractiveness of potential alternatives.

Marriage is an indicator of a high level of investment because it implies that the partners have made a lifetime commitment and that they share resources (Waite 1995). It also creates social barriers to relationship exit by formally linking partners’ families, social networks, and other institutions (Stolzenberg et al. 1995). Data from nationally representative samples show that although marriage is less common among the incarceration population (Lopoo & Western 2005; Siennick et al. 2014), it is still highly valued among demographic groups at high risk of having a partner incarcerated (Gibson-Davis et al. 2005; Waller & McLanahan 2005; Western et al. 2004). In addition, ethnographic work suggests that marriage may be a protective factor for couples who experience the incarceration of a partner. For example, multiple studies find that wives of incarcerated men desire to be loyal to marriage vows, even indicating that they would have left their partner if they hadn’t already been married to them (Braman 2004; Girshick 1996). Similarly, Comfort (2008:173) finds that deciding to continue a relationship through a period of incarceration “confers a sense of moral righteousness on the woman” left behind. Furthermore, preserving relationship quality during incarceration may be more feasible among couples who are married. For example, a legal marriage prior to the incarceration is required for overnight visits in some states (Comfort 2002; Reinhart 2016). Thus, among incarcerated individuals marriage may be associated with greater relationship continuity following release.

Relationship length also indicates some level of investment because it entails an accumulation of shared experiences, possessions, and social networks (Kamp Dush 2011). Moreover, partners converge over time as they influence each other’s behaviors and emotions (Anderson et al. 2003;
Kreager & Haynie 2011). Thus, perhaps due to increased relationship quality and satisfaction (Gonzaga et al. 2007; Sprecher 1991), risk of dissolution decreases as relationship length increases (Heaton 1991). Among couples experiencing the incarceration of a partner, relationship length may have similar effects. In Comfort’s (2008:168) study of prison visitation, one woman describes her commitment to a relationship with an incarcerated man as follows:

If I leave him now, he’s just going to regress, he’s going to get worse … All of the time and the effort, and the money, and the love, that we have invested—that’s worth more than gold. Because people don’t just be together for that long amount of time, and you just can’t throw it away. It’s just something, it’s just, [with deep feeling] you just can’t throw it away.

Her statement implies a belief that as long as she remains in a relationship with her partner she can continue to influence his behavior for the better, perhaps with some anticipation of a more rewarding relationship in the future. Thus, individuals who are romantically involved with their partner for a longer period of time prior to becoming incarcerated should be more likely to continue their relationship following release.

Having a child together is an investment because of the demands it places on both parents (Kalil et al. 2014), but it may also be an exit barrier if there is concern that ending the relationship would affect the child’s wellbeing, particularly when the child is young (Cherlin 1977; Heaton 1990). Perhaps for these reasons, married men are at much lower risk of divorce following incarceration if they have a child with their spouse (Apel et al. 2010). Moreover, qualitative work has revealed that women linked to incarcerated men often express a desire to stay together throughout a period of incarceration so that their child can be raised with both biological parents (Braman 2004; Comfort 2008). Braman (2004:51) documents this sentiment among a woman whose husband had been incarcerated several times during the course of their marriage:

[W]e want to raise our kids together … [t]here’s not too many [families] … at this time that’s not a single parent family. I never wanted that for my kids. I wanted them to have something that I didn’t have.

Therefore, having a child with a partner may be associated with relationship continuity following release from prison or jail.

Although rarely discussed within a social exchange framework, the length of the incarceration may also alter investments, barriers, and alternatives in ways that influence the risk of dissolution. First, as a type of forced separation, incarceration limits the mutual investment partners can make. Like events such as military deployment, incarceration limits interaction between partners (Rindfuss & Stephan 1990), and mail, phone calls, and visits only partly compensate (Christian 2005; Comfort 2008). Indeed, just as partners in long-lasting relationships grow more similar over time, during longer incarcerations both partners may change in each other’s absence. Second, longer incarcerations may remove previous exit barriers, for example, by forcing financially dependent partners into the labor market. Qualitative and mixed-methods studies suggest that in their partner’s absence, women become accustomed to paying bills and handling finances on their own (Comfort 2008; Harman et al. 2007; Waller & Swisher 2006).
Third, longer periods of incarceration may increase the attractiveness of potential alternatives by providing a longer opportunity to pursue a new “backup” partner (Braman 2004). Thus, a longer incarceration may be more likely to lead to breakup because it has a greater impacts on the costs and benefits of remaining in the relationship. Indeed, studies have found that much of the effect of incarceration on relationship dissolution is due to the length of the incarceration (Massoglia et al. 2011; Turney, 2015b).

RACIAL AND ETHNIC DIFFERENCES

The four indicators of investments, barriers, and alternatives examined in this study are important for understanding family stability. But, we recognize that rates of marriage, childbearing, relationship duration, and incarceration length differ across racial and ethnic groups. These differences may be due to cultural factors or variation in exposure to structural conditions (Bulanda and Brown 2007). Economic disadvantage plays an important role in family formation and dissolution. The availability of “marriageable men,” or men with stable earnings, is associated with women’s transition to first marriage (Lichter et al. 1992; Wilson 1987), and possibly accounts for the lower likelihood of marriage and relationship stability for blacks relative to whites or Hispanics (Bramlett & Mosher 2002; Manning & Smock 1995). Hispanics may also experience economic disadvantage, but perhaps due to strong cultural beliefs about the important of marriage and family, they are more likely to marry, have children, and be in stable relationships compared to non-Hispanics (Bramlett & Mosher 2002; Sweeney & Raley 2014). Whites have comparable marriage rates to Hispanics (albeit slightly lower) and are the least likely to have a marital or non-marital birth. In terms of incarceration length, blacks and Hispanics are significantly more likely to be serving longer sentences compared to whites (see e.g., Spohn 2000).

Given these differences in investment, barriers, and alternatives across race and ethnicity, it is not surprising that romantic relationships tend to be less stable for blacks compared to whites and Hispanics (Bramlett & Mosher 2002; Lichter et al. 2006). However, less is known regarding differences in relationship dissolution across race and ethnicity among couples whose relationship was interrupted by an incarceration spell. To date, we are aware of only one study that has examined this issue. Using data from the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Survey, Western (2006) examined the effect of incarceration on the odds of separation among couples who were in a cohabiting or marital union at the time of their child’s birth. The author reported that the probabilities of separation one year later for incarcerated black, Hispanic, and white men were 46.2%, 39.1%, and 34.1% respectively, suggesting that there are likely important differences in relationship dissolution across racial and ethnic groups. Yet it is unclear whether this pattern would emerge over a longer period of time or in a sample that includes married and cohabiting partners that do not share a child together.

In light of these findings, we anticipate that whites and Hispanics will have more enduring relationships than blacks following a spell of incarceration. Moreover, we expect that these racial and ethnic differences in relationship dissolution will be explained (or mediated), in part, by four relationship-specific characteristics (i.e., marriage, child with partner, relationship duration, and incarceration length). Specifically, we expect blacks to have less enduring relationships (relative
to whites and Hispanics) because they are less likely to have relationship characteristics that protect against dissolution.

CURRENT STUDY

We make several notable contributions to the literature on relationship dissolution in an era of mass incarceration. Most importantly, our study is among the first to examine predictors of relationship stability among a national sample of incarcerated individuals. We thus advance the literature from a focus on whether incarceration leads to family instability to an emphasis on factors that predict relationship stability among couples at risk of dissolution due to incarceration. Additionally, we examine differences by race and ethnicity not only in relationship stability, but also in factors that are likely to be associated with the probability of staying together or breaking up following a period of incarceration. Our findings thus complement prior research on the role of race and ethnicity in relationship stability by focusing on individuals in the wake of an incarceration—individuals who are disproportionately black or Hispanic.

Our data allow us to go beyond prior work in several other ways. First, they are from a contemporary cohort of young adults who were incarcerated during the height of mass incarceration in the United States. Much of the prior work on incarceration and family disruptions involves study participants from earlier cohorts (Travis et al. 2014). Second, we focus on both cohabiting and marital unions. Given that a larger percentage of incarcerated men are in cohabiting rather than marital unions (Western et al. 2004), broadening our focus beyond marriage allows us to capture a more representative set of romantic relationships in this population. Third, our monthly data allow us to pay detailed attention to the timing of both incarceration spells and relationship transitions, thus providing more certainty about causal ordering and a more precise look at the timing of dissolution than found in past studies.

METHODS

DATA

We use data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97), which drew on a nationally representative sample of 8,984 youth who were living in the U.S. in 1996 and born between 1980 and 1984. The NLSY97 contains two probability-based household samples: a nationally representative sample of 6,748 youths and an additional over-sample of 2,236 Black and Hispanic youths. Data have been collected annually from 1997 to 2011 and biannually starting in 2013, with a total of 16 waves of data available at the time this study was conducted. Respondents were between 12 and 18 years old at the first wave and between 28 and 34 years old as of the most recent interview.

The NLSY97 is well suited to examinations of relationship dissolution following incarceration for several reasons. First, it contains detailed information regarding the timing of major life events, including coresidential relationships (both marriage and cohabitation) and incarceration spells. At each wave, respondents were asked to report the dates of these life events. With this information, it is possible to construct month-to-month event profiles for each respondent.
The current study focuses on a sample of 234 respondents who were coresiding with a marital or non-marital romantic partner during the month leading up to an incarceration spell. This sample excludes 8,325 respondents who were never incarcerated or never in a coresidential relationship during the study. Of the 659 respondents who were at some point incarcerated and in a coresidential relationship, we excluded 365 who never had their relationship interrupted by an incarceration spell, meaning they were either incarcerated before or after a marital or cohabitating relationship. Next, we excluded 37 respondents who were married but were not living with their spouse during the month leading up to incarceration because it is unclear whether these respondents were unofficially separated from their spouse at the time. Next, we excluded 15 respondents who were still incarcerated at their most recent interview because they were never at risk for cohabitation dissolution. Lastly, we excluded 8 respondents who were neither white, black, nor Hispanic.

MEASURES

Dependent Variable. Our dependent variable is marital or cohabitation dissolution (henceforth referred to as relationship dissolution). Relationships were considered dissolved if the respondent reported no longer coresiding with their partner/spouse at any point in the months following release from incarceration; whereas, relationships were considered intact if the respondent reported continuously coresiding with their partner/spouse after release from incarceration until their most recent interview. In most cases, relationship dissolution was the result of a “break up” (for non-married couples) or “separation” and/or “divorce” (for married couples). However, in a few cases, married respondents stopped coresiding with their spouse, even though they reported still being married. We treated these relationships as dissolved because it was unclear whether couples were unofficially separated. Relationships that transitioned from a cohabitating to a marital union were considered intact.

Focal Independent Variables. Our study includes four focal independent variables. Each variable is time-stable and measured the month respondents’ incarceration spell began, with the exception of long separation (see below). Marital status is a dichotomous variable indicating whether respondents were married to their partner (0 = cohabiting, 1 = married). Child with partner is a dichotomous variable indicating whether respondents had a biological child with their partner (0 = no, 1 = yes). Relationship duration indicates the number of months respondents were living with their partner/spouse prior to the month they were incarcerated. Long separation is a dummy variable indicating whether respondents were incarcerated for 12 or more months (0 = no, 1 = yes); a 12 month cutoff was used because it approximates the distinction between a jail or prison stay and supplemental analyses suggest that this cutoff best fit the data.

Race/Ethnicity. We measured race and ethnicity as a set of mutually exclusive dummy variables for white, black, and Hispanic. Because there were very few respondents from other racial or ethnic groups that had a coresidential relationship interrupted by an incarceration spell, we focus only on white, black, and Hispanic respondents in this study. In addition, due to the limited sample size, we do not differentiate between Hispanic subpopulations (e.g., nativity status),
although we recognize that there may be important differences in relationship dissolution based on these characteristics (Osborne et al. 2007).

Control Variables. Several time-stable control variables were included in this study because of their association with race/ethnicity, our focal independent variables, and relationship dissolution. Male is measured as a dichotomous indicator of respondents’ gender (0 = female, 1 = male). Age is measured in years at the month respondents were incarcerated. High school diploma is measured as a dummy variable indicating whether respondents had graduated high school prior to the month they were incarcerated (0 = dropout or GED recipient, 1 = high school graduate). Hours worked is a continuous variable reflecting the average hours worked per week in the 12 months leading up to incarceration. Prior incarcerations indicates the number of times respondents had been incarcerated before their current incarceration spell (0 = no prior incarcerations, 7 = seven incarcerations). Finally, prior criminal history is measured as a set of dummy variables indicating whether respondents had ever reported a violent conviction (0 = no, 1 = yes), property conviction (0 = no, 1 = yes), drug conviction (0 = no, 1 = yes), or other conviction (0 = no, 1 = yes) before being incarcerated.

ANALYTICAL STRATEGY

In this study, we use Cox proportional hazard models to predict the timing of relationship dissolution. This strategy is advantageous because it accounts for right-censoring and makes no assumption about the underlying survival distribution (Allison 1984). For these models, the data file is structured as a person-month format. Respondents were considered at risk for relationship dissolution starting the month they were released from incarceration until 1) the month the respondent reported no longer coresiding with their partner/spouse or 2) the month the respondent were last interviewed (in which case they were right-censored). In some cases (n =11), respondents reported their marriage ending while they were incarcerated. For those cases, the relationship is considered dissolved the month the respondent was released from jail or prison. Altogether our analyses contain information of 234 respondents, contributing 6,334 observations (or person-months).

During the study, some respondents had more than one marital or cohabiting relationship interrupted by an incarceration spell (what we call cohabitation-incarceration spells). For example, 190 respondents reported 1 cohabitation-incarceration spell, 38 reported 2 spells, 5 reported 3 spells, and 1 reported 7 spells. Cox regression can accommodate multiple-event data by treating cohabitation-incarceration spells as nested within individuals. Standard errors were adjusted for this clustering using the clustered sandwich estimator. The results of a supplementary frailty model (not shown) indicated that a random effect at the individual level was not needed.

Our analysis proceeds in three steps. First, we present descriptive statistics for the full sample and descriptive statistics by race/ethnicity to determine whether whites, blacks, and Hispanics differ with respect to our focal independent variables. Second, we estimated a baseline model where we predict the hazard of relationship dissolution from race/ethnicity and the controls. Because we expect blacks to have the least enduring relationships and whites and Hispanics to have relatively similar rates of dissolution, we use as predictors dummy variables for whites and
Hispanics, with blacks serving as the reference category. This model allows us to assess whether there is meaningful variation in the timing of relationship dissolution between whites, blacks, and Hispanics. Third, we introduce our focal independent variables into the baseline model. This allows us to assess whether being married, having a child with one’s partner, relationship duration, and a long separation are associated with the hazard of relationship dissolution. It also allows us to examine whether these factors mediate the association between race/ethnicity and relationship dissolution. If there is a mediating effect, the introduction of these factors should attenuate the size of the Hispanic and white coefficients from the baseline model.

RESULTS

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the full sample and for whites, blacks, and Hispanics separately. An inspection of table 1 shows that a low proportion of respondents were married (19%), about half had a child with their partner/spouse (50%), and the average respondent had been living with their partner for 2 years prior to incarceration (24.86 months). In terms of separation length, only a quarter of respondents were incarcerated for more than 12 months (24%), suggesting that most “incarceration spells” were likely stays in jail rather than prison. The modal incarceration length was one month (33%) and the longest incarceration spell was just under 9 years. In addition, as would be expected, our sample of incarcerated young adults were disadvantaged in several respects: They were typically male, few were high school graduates, most were working part-time prior to incarceration, and many had a past criminal history.

Consistent with prior research, table 1 also shows that rates of marriage, children with partner, relationship duration, and long separation differed significantly across racial/ethnic groups (evident by the significant test statistics). In particular, Hispanics were the most likely to be married, have a child with their partner, and be in a longer relationship, followed by whites, and then blacks. Blacks were more likely to be separated from their partner for 12 months or longer compared to whites and Hispanics. Racial and ethnic differences were also observed for three of the control variables: Blacks were more likely to be male and to have worked fewer hours per week than whites and Hispanics; and Hispanics were younger than whites at the time of incarceration. Overall, these findings suggest that blacks were less likely to have relationship characteristics that may protect against dissolution, compared to whites and Hispanics.

COX REGRESSION

Table 2 presents six Cox regression models predicting the timing of relationship dissolution. Model 1, which evaluates our first research question, predicted the hazard of relationship dissolution from race/ethnicity and the controls. Both Hispanics ($b = -0.45$, $p < .05$) and whites ($b = -0.34$, $p < .05$) had significantly lower log-hazards of relationship dissolution than blacks, net of controls. The difference between whites and Hispanics was not statistically significant. To facilitate the interpretation of these results, we exponentiated these coefficients to gain hazard ratios. The results suggests that Hispanics and whites respectively have a 36.2% and 28.8% lower hazard of relationship dissolution relative to blacks [(exp(b)−1)*100]. The corresponding survival function is shown in figure 1. In our case, survival refers to the cumulative risk of
relationship continuation over the entire follow-up period. Figure 1 shows that blacks’ relationships were more likely to dissolve and dissolved faster in the 8 years (96 months) following incarceration compared to whites’ and Hispanics’ relationships.

Next, we turn to our second research question. To do that, we added to model 1 our measures of marital status (model 2), child with partner (model 3), relationship duration (model 4), long separation (model 5), and the four together (model 6). Results suggest that marriage ($b = -0.50$, $p < .05$), child with partner ($b = -0.24$, $p < .10$), and relationship duration ($b = -0.01$, $p < .01$) predicted a lower log-hazard of relationship dissolution; whereas, long separation ($b = 0.42$, $p < .001$) was associated with a higher log-hazard of relationship dissolution. Expressed as hazard ratios, these results suggest that being married and having a child with one’s partner/spouse is associated with a 39.3% and 21.3% reduction in the hazard of relationship dissolution, and a long separation is associated with a 52.2% increase in the hazard $[(\exp(b)−1)*100]$. For relationship duration, for each additional month individuals were living with their partner/spouse prior to incarceration, the odds of relationship dissolution decrease by 1.0%.

Finally, we turn to our third research question to examine whether differences in marital status, child with partner, relationship duration, and long separation observed across race/ethnicity in table 1 explain differences in relationship dissolution between whites, blacks, and Hispanics. Models 2-5 show that being married, having a child with one’s partner, relationship duration, and long separation accounted for 15.5%, 16.2%, 16.2%, and 12.3% of the difference in the hazard of relationship dissolution between Hispanic and black respondents (respectively) and 4.9%, 3.6%, 3.0%, and 22.6% of the difference between whites and blacks (respectively). Model 6 shows that our focal independent variables (when combined) account for 40.0% of the difference in the hazard of relationship dissolution between Hispanics and blacks and 25.3% of the difference between whites and blacks. Overall, these results suggest that blacks had a higher hazard of relationship dissolution (compared to whites and Hispanics), in part because they were less likely to be in the types of relationships that offered resilience in the face of incarceration.

**DISCUSSION**

Using a sample of respondents who had a marital or non-marital romantic relationship interrupted by an incarceration spell, our study produced three main findings. First, we found that relative to whites’ and Hispanics’, blacks’ relationships were considerably more likely to dissolve following the spell of incarceration. Second, we found that being married, having a child with a partner/spouse, and a longer relationship duration protected against relationship dissolution, whereas a long separation (defined as an incarceration lasting 12 months or longer) was a risk factor for relationship dissolution. Third, we also found that these factors accounted, in part, for the lower risk of relationship dissolution found among whites and Hispanics relative to blacks—although relationship characteristics (i.e., marital status, child with partner, and relationship duration) explained a larger portion of the Hispanic-black difference in relationship dissolution than the white-black difference.

This study is not without limitations. First, our sample is limited to individuals who, for the most part, experienced relatively short incarcerations during young adulthood. In addition, we did not examine relationship dissolution among married couples who were not living together at the time.
of incarceration nor do we examine relationship dissolution among other racial and ethnic groups. Thus, these findings might not generalize to older individuals, those who experienced relatively long incarcerations, married couples who do not live together, or racial/ethnic groups besides whites, blacks, and Hispanics. Future work should consider examining predictors of relationship resilience among different subgroups. Second, our analyses were limited to time-stable control variables measured prior to incarceration. One of the tradeoffs of focusing on the detailed timing of relationship dissolution is the lack of controls at the monthly-level. As a result, we were unable to incorporate a number of time-varying characteristics that could influence our focal independent variables and relationship dissolution. Future work should consider incorporating time-varying confounders.

In addition to addressing these limitations, we see at least two areas where future studies can advance the literature. First, we are unable to examine relationships that might have dissolved in anticipation to incarceration. In our data, we observed a non-trivial number of relationships that ended during the 2 to 3 months leading up to an incarceration spell. While it could be the case that the breakup predicted the incarceration (Bersani & Doherty 2013), it is also possible that some relationships ended before the partner went behind bars. Such a possibility would be consistent with studies that have found heightened rates of marital conflict leading up to military deployments (Pincus et al. 2001). Future research should pay closer attention to the context of relationship dissolution among incarcerated individuals.

Second, although our study is one of the first to examine predictors of relationship resilience among incarcerated persons, we were only able to examine a partial list of variables. Future work should consider additional protective factors. One promising area of research concerns prison visitation. As mentioned earlier, the physical separation of a partner during a spell of incarceration is thought to decrease relationship quality, emotional closeness, and social bonds (Comfort 2008; Siennick et al 2014; Turney 2015a), all of which undermine relationship stability. This is often complicated by the fact that prisons are located far from inmates’ communities. However, if visitation helps couples retain social bonds and emotional closeness, then perhaps it will increase the likelihood that former inmates’ relationships remain intact postincarceration. Although no study has examined the effect of visitation on relationship dissolution, several studies suggest that visitation by a partner/spouse is beneficial for inmates (Mears et al. 2012). In addition, recent work by Cochran and colleagues (2015) suggests that prison visitation is racially and ethnically patterned, with blacks being less likely to be receive visits compared to whites and Hispanics.

In conclusion, our study contributes to the literature on the consequences of incarceration for family life by being one of the first to examine predictors of relationship resilience among a national sample of incarcerated individuals. Our finding that marriage, having a child with one’s partner, and relationship duration increases relationship stability, and that a long separation decreases stability, helps illuminate potential points of intervention for incarcerated individuals and their families. In addition, our findings underscore the importance of examining whether (and how) relationship dissolution varies across race and ethnicity among incarcerated individuals. Nevertheless, future research is still needed to identify other resiliency factors in order to assist inmates in the reentry process.
REFERENCES


Table 1. Descriptive Statistics on Focal Independent Variables and Controls by Race/Ethnicity.

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<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.32</td>
</tr>
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<td>23.58</td>
<td>21.47</td>
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<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property conviction</td>
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<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug conviction</td>
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<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.25</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0.43</td>
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</tr>
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</table>

**NOTE:** Test statistics are F-tests for continuous variables and Wald’s $\chi^2$ for dichotomous variables.

*Source: NLSY97*

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001 (two-tailed).
Table 2. Cox Proportional Hazard Models Predicting Timing of Relationship Dissolution Following Incarceration from Race/Ethnicity, Relationship Characteristics, and Controls (N = 6,334 obs on 234 respondents).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th></th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th></th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th></th>
<th>Model 4</th>
<th></th>
<th>Model 5</th>
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<th>Model 6</th>
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<td>b</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>SE</td>
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<td>SE</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>b</td>
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<td>-0.38*</td>
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<td>-0.40*</td>
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<td>-0.33*</td>
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<td>-0.33*</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>-0.33*</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>-0.27†</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>-0.26†</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0.22</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.38</td>
<td>0.24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child with partner</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship duration</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Long separation</td>
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<td>0.42***</td>
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<tr>
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<td>-0.09</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
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<td>-0.05**</td>
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<td>-0.06**</td>
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<td>0.23†</td>
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<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hours worked</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prior incarcerations</td>
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<td>-0.10</td>
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<td>-0.14</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>-0.12**</td>
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<td>0.39**</td>
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<td>0.36*</td>
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<td>0.43**</td>
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<td>0.38**</td>
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<td>0.41†</td>
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<tr>
<td>Property conviction</td>
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<td>0.34*</td>
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<td>0.30*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Drug conviction</td>
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<td>0.16</td>
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<td>0.11†</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other conviction</td>
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<td>0.15</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
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<td>Model χ²</td>
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<td>45.43***</td>
<td>51.71***</td>
<td>66.83***</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTES: Black serves as the reference category for race/ethnicity. Breslow method used to handle ties. Standard errors are adjusted for clustering of cohabitation-incarceration spells within individuals.

Source: NLSY97

†p < .10, *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001 (two-tailed).
Figure 1. Adjusted Proportions of Respondents Still Living with their Partners at Each Month since Release from Incarceration, by Race and Ethnicity.

Source: NLSY97