**Adult Child Imprisonment and Parent's Well-Being**

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**Extended Abstract**

**Motivation and Overview**

Inspired by the American prison boom, extensive research has focused on the risk of incarceration, carceral inequalities, and its consequences. Initially focused on people who experienced incarceration directly, more recently researchers explored how incarceration alters the lives of family members, including spouses/partners and children. However, researchers have paid little attention to how incarceration reshapes the social experience of parenthood and aging for parents of adult children who experience incarceration. Driven by mass imprisonment combined with longer life expectancy, adult child incarceration might have emerged as a historically novel step in the later life course of American parents. Furthermore, adult child incarceration may have broad social implications if it is common, concentrated among the already socially disadvantaged, and entails further negative consequences for parents’ well-being.

This study attempts to fill this important gap in previous literature. It extends existing research in two primary ways. First, using life-table methods, we provide the first empirical estimates of the risk of experiencing adult child imprisonment and explore how it varies by parent's race and education. Second, we examine how adult child's incarceration is associated with parent's mental, physical, and economic well-being.
Prevalence and Social Patterning of Adult Child's Incarceration among American Parents

Although adult child incarceration may have important social implications, it is of social concern on the population level if it is highly common, at least among certain social groups. However, there is no systematic empirical evidence of the risk of adult child incarceration and how it is distributed. Existing studies of the lifetime risk of imprisonment for adults provide some insight into the magnitude and social patterning of the risk of adult child imprisonment. For instance, Pettit and Western (2004) estimate that at the end of the 1990s, about one third of black non-college men had gone to prison by their mid-thirties, e.g., when their parents were still likely to be alive. However, these estimates cannot be translated directly to the risk of adult child imprisonment because the former is influenced not only by adult child's imprisonment, but also by fertility and mortality processes. Therefore, in this study, we use life-table methods to calculate the risk of experiencing adult child imprisonment and explore how it varies by parent's race and class (as measured by education).

Adult Child's Incarceration and Parent's Mental, Physical, and Economic Well-Being

Previous research on the consequences of incarceration for individual outcomes suggest that adult child's incarceration may compromise parent's emotional, physical, and economic well-being both in the short and long term (for example, Pager 2003; Wildeman 2010). Research on adult child-parent relationships shows that for aging parents, adult children are an important source of emotional support, physical care, and financial help (Seltzer and Bianchi 2013), all of which stop being available if a child is imprisoned. Moreover, having an adult child arrested, visiting him/her in prison, and dealing with his/her absence might be traumatizing and stressful for parents, and is also likely to be stigmatizing.

Data and Methods

The data in this study come from the NLSY79 child and young adult survey. Following previous studies on estimating the risk of imprisonment for adults (Pettit and Western 2004) and the risk of parental imprisonment for children (Wildeman 2009), we use life-table methods to calculate the risk of experiencing adult child's incarceration. Specifically, we calculate the risk that a mother will experience the incarceration of her adult child through age 52 (the oldest age...
for which there is data available for mothers in the NLSY79). These data sources have a few advantages for estimating prevalence of adult child incarceration for mothers. First, the NLSY79 has a nationally representative sample of young women born between 1957 and 1964; therefore, estimates of their risk of adult child incarceration can be viewed as estimates of adult child incarceration for that cohort in the U.S. as a whole. Second, the NLSY79 child and young adult survey provides detailed information on almost all the children born to the mothers in NLSY79 survey, including whether the child was interviewed while in prison/jail, not interviewed because in prison or jail, or whether they spent time in prison, jail, or a youth institution since date of last interview. Third, since we are able to match mothers to children, we can make sure not to double count in cases where a mother had multiple children in prison or jail. Lastly, the timing of the cohort is ideal because most of the children of the mothers entered young adulthood during the peak of the prison boom (in the 1990s and 2000s).

To explore the association between adult child's incarceration and parent's well-being, we use the same data sources as above. These data are particularly well-suited for this task because there is information about whether the adult child experienced incarceration as well as on a wide range of aspects of mother’s well-being. Moreover, there is also self-report data on criminal behavior enabling us to better tease out whether any associations we observe are due to the confinement of the child or to the child’s criminal behavior more generally. The rich nature of the data and its longitudinal nature for both children and mothers enable us to incorporate a number of modeling strategies (other than controlling for criminal behavior) to address selection bias that are common in the literature (see Wildeman and Muller 2012). Specifically, we will run models with fixed effects to control for unobservable time-invariant factors, models with a lagged dependent variable, and propensity score matching models with a wide range of maternal and young adult controls.

**Expected Findings and Contributions**

In this study, we seek to make two primary contributions. First, we will estimate the risk of experiencing adult child incarceration and how it is stratified by parent's race and education. Second, we examine whether and how adult child's incarceration is associated with various indicators of parent's well-being. If adult child incarceration is common, unequally distributed, and entails negative consequences for parent's well-being, then incarceration contributes to
inequality not only among felons, their partners (same generation) and children (generation down), but also among their parents (generation up). Together, these findings will contribute to the literatures on family, incarceration, inequality, and have important policy implications.

References:


