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Segregation and African-American imprisonment rates for drug offenses



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ABSTRACT

Scholars argue that the dramatic increase in the African-American incarceration rate that occurred after the civil rights era was in part a reflection of the declining utility of residential segregation as a modern form of social control. Existing research has not thoroughly investigated the association between racial segregation and prison admission rates. Using 2002 data for 198 metropolitan counties, this research examines the relationship between two dimensions of racial residential segregation and African-American prison admission rates for drug offenses. The results from a multivariate regression analysis reveal that the prison admission rates of African-Americans for drug offenses are lower in counties where White residents are more residentially isolated from African-Americans. The admission rates are unaffected by the dissimilarity index. Consistent with recent research on the level of coercive control, the findings suggest that the effect of the percentage of African-Americans residing in an area is nonlinear.

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1. Introduction

The war on drugs has been the primary contributor to mass incarceration over the past 30 years in the U.S. (Alexander, 2010). Between 1980 and 2005, the number of individuals imprisoned for drug offenses increased by approximately 1100% (Mauer & King, 2007), which has had a dramatic and disproportionate effect on African-Americans. Between 1986 and 1996, the rate at which Whites were incarcerated for drug offenses increased by 115%, while the rate for African-Americans increased by 465% (Beatty, Petteruti & Ziedenberg, 2007). These discrepancies cannot be explained solely by racial differences in drug activity. Beatty et al. (2007, p. 7) provide compelling

evidence that African-Americans and Whites “use and sell drugs at similar rates.”

These disparities may, in part, be explained by the racial threat hypothesis developed by Blalock (1957, 1967). Blalock suggests that as the minority population in an area increases, Whites perceive a growing threat to their economic and political power. In response, the dominant group – Whites – seek ways to reduce, or at least manage, perceived threats to their interests. One available strategy is to use law enforcement mechanisms to incarcerate the minorities who represent the threat. Various scholars suggest that the dramatic increase in African-American incarceration rates over the past thirty years is in part a reflection of the declining utility of racial segregation as a form of social control (Alexander, 2010; Wacquant, 2001). Although the level of racial segregation remains high, overall there has been a decline over the past twenty years (Defina & Hannon, 2009). Therefore, as more African-Americans move into White areas, it is reasonable to assert that the racial threat has increased. It may not be a coincidence that the African-American/White

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prison ratio increased significantly over the past twenty-five years.

Wacquant (2001) is the first to suggest that the recent twenty-year incarceration binge reflects the use of a new apparatus to control the African-American population in the U.S. He argues that mass incarceration of African-Americans is a result of the breakdown of the ghetto as a means of social control. According to Wacquant, the ghetto fulfilled the same two functions that slavery and Jim Crow had in earlier times. First, it provided an available pool of workers to exploit, and second, it separated African-Americans so they would “not ‘contaminate’ the surrounding white areas” (Wacquant, 2001, p. 99). With the loss of manufacturing jobs in the late 1960s and 1970s, a reserve of unemployed African-Americans was no longer necessary, and this impoverished and idle group posed an increasing threat to the economic and political order. Most recently, Alexander (2010, p. 4) suggests that “mass incarceration...is a well-disguised system of racialized social control...strikingly similar to Jim Crow”. The goal of the present study is to test the hypothesis that segregation, as measured by the isolation index, will have a negative effect on the rate at which African-Americans are incarcerated for drug offenses. Evidence of this relationship would provide strong support for the premise presented by Wacquant and Alexander.

2. Review of the literature

Scholars working within the conflict tradition provide considerable evidence that the criminal justice system has been used to maintain political and economic inequalities that have existed for centuries in the U.S. Research examining the impact of minority populations on police department size or expenditures for policing and arrest rates or incarceration rates tends to treat the relationship as linear. In his investigation of the impact of the percentage of non-Whites in a community on “indices of discrimination,” Blalock (1957, p. 678) hypothesizes a “non-linear relationship at the upper end of the percent non white continuum” and predicts “increasing function with a decreasing slope.”

Although Blalock does not find evidence of this expected non-linear relationship, recent investigators studying the impact of an increasing African-American population on indices of coercive control find a positive relationship that tails off once the African-American population reaches a certain level. Stucky (2005) reports that, when controlling from crime, the percentage of the African-American population is a positive and significant predictor of police department size. However, Stucky (2005, p. 153) notes that the relationship appears curvilinear and that the effect of “percent African-Americans begins to have a negative effect on police” once this group becomes the majority. Keen & Jacobs (2009, p. 226) find that once the percent of African-Americans reaches about 23%, further increases in the African-American population suppresses the African-Americans to White prison admissions ratio.

Race-specific admissions data are critical in testing the hypothesis that imprisonment is replacing the social

control function of the ghetto and Jim Crow. The only way this can be tested is by examining the impact of racial segregation on the admissions rate of African-American offenders. Research focusing on overall prison admission rates sheds no light on whether the factors that influence prison admissions vary across race. The war on drugs provides a perfect opportunity to investigate whether incarceration has replaced Jim Crow. Since drug offenses are victimless crimes in which both the police and prosecutors have broad powers and virtually unchecked discretion, it is not surprising that only a “small fraction of offenders are arrested, prosecuted and incarcerated” (Alexander, 2010, p. 104). According to Beatty et al. (2007, p. 6), admissions to prison for drug offenses in 2002 accounted for “less than 1 percent of all drug users.”

Conflict theorists have long speculated that Whites strive to control threatening populations through racial residential segregation (Blauener, 1972; Spitzer, 1975; Turk, 1969). The real or perceived threat can be economic, political, and/or racial. Research studies document that racial stereotypes exist which portray African-Americans as criminals (Bridges & Steen, 1998; Mann & Zatz, 1998; Swigert & Farrell, 1976; Tittle & Curran, 1988). Russell-Brown (2009) refers to this phenomenon as the “criminalblackman stereotype.” Thus, it is not surprising that, when controlling for crime, the fear of crime is higher in areas with larger African-American populations (Liska, Lawrence, & Sanchirico, 1982; Quillian & Pager, 2001; Taylor & Covington, 1993; Thompson, Bankston, & Pierre, 1992). If racial segregation fulfills a social control function, there is less need to rely on the criminal justice system to maintain control. As noted by Stults & Baumer (2007, p. 512), relatively “few studies have considered the effect of segregation on crime control and the results have been mixed.” Chamlin & Liska (1992, p. 110) report that racial segregation “moderately affects arrest rates in 1972,” but it had “small and inconsistent effects” on arrest rates in 1982. Carmichael (2005, p. 555) reports that “in the most segregated cities, rates of jail admissions were at their lowest levels,” thus supporting his prediction of a negative relationship between racial segregation and jail admissions rates. Carmichael suggests that the spatial distribution, not simply the size, of the African-American population influences prison admissions. Racial threat theorists would predict such a pattern: as African-Americans become more visible in White communities, perceived threats of increased economic competition, reduced political influence, and fear of more crime may lead to increased coercive social control efforts by the dominant group.

It is a documented fact that, relative to their representation in the U.S. population, African-Americans are disproportionately incarcerated. The obvious question is whether these disparities are the result of a disproportional involvement in street crime by African-Americans, or reflect systematic discrimination within the criminal justice system. A recent study concludes that the representation of African-Americans, Whites and Hispanics among offenders incarcerated “in state prisons corresponds closely to their representation in arrest statistics” (Harris, Steffensmeier, Ulmer, & Painter-Davis, 2009, p. 187).

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