Social Science Research 53 (2015) 325–337

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Social Science Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ssresearch

Mass imprisonment and the life course revisited: Cumulative years spent imprisoned and marked for working-age black and white men ☆

Evelyn J. Patterson [a,*], Christopher Wildeman [b]

[a] Vanderbilt University, 2301 Vanderbilt Place, VU Station B, Box 351811, Nashville, TN 37235-1811, United States
[b] Cornell University, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 2 December 2014
Revised 24 May 2015
Accepted 18 June 2015
Available online 20 June 2015

Keywords:
Mass imprisonment
Life course
Multistate life tables
Inequality
Prison boom

ABSTRACT

Over the last 40 years, imprisonment has become a common stage in the life-course for low-skilled and minority men, with implications not only for inequality among adult men but also for inequality more broadly. Unfortunately, all research documenting how increases in imprisonment have transformed the life-course of poor, minority men has neglected to estimate how much time black and white men on average spend imprisoned or marked as an ex-prisoner. In this article, we fill this gap by using multistate life tables to estimate what share of their working lives (18–64) black and white men will spend imprisoned and marked as ex-prisoners. Our estimates imply that white men spend on average 0.33 years of their working lives imprisoned and 2.31 years marked, while black men spend on average 1.79 years of their working lives imprisoned and 11.14 years marked. This implies that black men spend on average one-third of their working lives either imprisoned or having been freed but marked by the penal system. For the 32.2% of black men who ever experience imprisonment (Bonczar, 2003), moreover, these estimates imply that they spend on average 5.56 years imprisoned, corresponding to 13.4% of their working lives. Taken together, these findings imply a dramatic reorientation of the life course for black men, as one-third of the black male population will spend one-seventh of their working life in prison.

1. Introduction and background

Massive increases in the American imprisonment rate since the mid-1970s have dramatically altered the life-course of black men and men with little education (Pettit and Western, 2004). This transformation is maybe most evident in changes in the lifetime risk of imprisonment for black men. While around 10 percent of black born in the late 1940s could expect to go to prison by their early 30s (Pettit and Western, 2004:161), 23 percent of such men born only 25 years later could expect to have gone to prison by the same age (Western and Wildeman, 2009:231).[1] Even if having ever been imprisoned had no negative effects on men's subsequent life-chances, this fundamental reorientation of the life-course would be important because of its historical novelty and implications for racialized systems of social control in the United States (Wacquant, 2001).

☆ We are grateful to Tukufu Zuberi, Irma Elo, Samuel Preston, Chris Muller, and Sara Wakefield for their advice on earlier versions of this manuscript.
* Corresponding author at: Department of Sociology, Vanderbilt University, 2301 Vanderbilt Place, VU Station B, Box 3531811, Nashville, TN 37235-1811, United States.
E-mail address: evelyn.patterson@vanderbilt.edu (E.J. Patterson).

[1] For cumulative risks that extend to older ages, see Bonczar (2003) and Bonczar and Beck (1997).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2015.06.011
0049-089X/

Yet nearly all signs point toward imprisonment also having large negative consequences for men's subsequent life-chances, increasing the importance of this dramatic reorientation of the life-course of minority men in America. Despite substantial obstacles to causal inference in this area (e.g., Wakefield and Uggen, 2010; Western and Muller, 2013; Wildeman and Muller, 2012), research documents that having ever been to prison diminishes men's labor market opportunities (Pager, 2003; Western, 2002, 2006) and increases their debt (Harris et al., 2010), imperils their health (Massoglia, 2008; Massoglia and Schnittker, 2009; Schnittker and John, 2007; Schnittker et al., 2012; Turney et al., 2012; but for an example showing null effects on men's mortality risk, see Massoglia et al., 2014),[2] increases their risk of marital dissolution (Lopoo and Western, 2005; Massoglia et al., 2011), and not only excludes them from the political process in many states (Manza and Uggen, 2006), but also serves as a barrier to political participation in states where ex-felons are not formally excluded from the political process (Brayne, 2014; Burch, 2013; Lerman and Weaver, 2014; Weaver and Lerman, 2010). Because imprisonment is both racially unequally distributed and has negative consequences for the life-course, moreover, mass imprisonment has exacerbated racial inequality among adult men in the United States (Lopoo and Western, 2005; Western, 2006).

The consequences of mass imprisonment for inequality are not limited to the adult men for whom imprisonment has become so common, however, and an emerging research literature documents the broader spillover effects of mass imprisonment for inequality. Because the risk of paternal imprisonment is unequally distributed (Wildeman, 2009) and this event harms children (e.g., Geller et al., 2012; Haskins, 2014, 2015; Roettger and Swisher, 2011; Wildeman, 2010), for instance, mass imprisonment has been shown to dramatically increase racial inequalities in child wellbeing (Wakefield and Wildeman, 2011, 2014). The same is true for racial disparities among adult women, although estimates of the prevalence (Lee et al., forthcoming) and consequences (Lee et al., 2014; Wildeman et al., 2012) of being connected to an imprisoned man for women have only recently been produced. Nonetheless, early attempts to estimate how large the macro-level consequences of mass imprisonment for inequality among women imply very large effects. In the most rigorous analysis to date, Johnson and Raphael (2009) show that racial disparities in AIDS among women are entirely attributable to mass imprisonment, showing just how wide-ranging the consequences of mass imprisonment for American inequality are.

Given the implications of mass imprisonment for individuals, families, and communities, it is surprising that we know only how many men can expect to be imprisoned on any given day (e.g., Western, 2006:17) and what proportion of men can expect to ever experience imprisonment (Bonczar, 2003; Bonczar and Beck, 1997; Pettit and Western, 2004; Western and Wildeman, 2009). The life-course perspective (Elder, 1974, 1975) that informed earlier work on the implications of mass imprisonment for poor, minority men also yields insight into a crucial next step: Estimating the duration of exposure to (1) imprisonment; (2) being out of prison—either on or off parole—but marked (Pager, 2003, 2007) as someone who has ever been imprisoned; and (3) never having been imprisoned. The duration of exposure to both of these criminal justice states—imprisoned and marked—merits attention for a number of reasons, which we outline in detail below.

On the most basic level, time spent imprisoned is important because of its incapacitation effect on economic and social life. This incapacitation leads not only to lost earnings and time in the labor market (e.g., Western and Beckett, 1999; Pettit, 2012), but also to time lost with family, which both gravely increases the risk of marital dissolution (e.g., Lopoo and Western, 2005; Massoglia et al., 2011) and leads to a whole host of strains for families, which have implications not only for the parenting children experience (e.g., Geller, 2013; Nurse, 2002; Swisher and Waller, 2008; Turney and Wildeman, 2013), but also for the well-being of the women left behind (e.g., Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2008; Fishman, 1990; Lee et al., 2014). Because of these crucial incapacitation effects for economic and social life, greater exposure to imprisonment is of the utmost social importance even if the additional time spent in prison has minimal effects on post-release life-course outcomes—as a growing research literature in criminology suggests is likely the case (e.g., Green and Winik, 2010; Kling, 2006; Loeffler, 2013; but see Patterson, 2013).

Yet the amount of time men spend imprisoned is important for another reason. Classic ethnographic accounts of the imprisonment experience (Clemmer, 1940; Sykes, 1958) focused on how imprisonment transformed the way men thought and acted—with likely negative effects on their mental health. Although prisoners almost certainly adjust to survive the brutalizing prison environment eventually (Bronsteen et al., 2009), the fact remains that time in prison spent in prison is both the most depressing (e.g., Turney et al., 2012) and the least happy (e.g., Wildeman et al., 2014) time many men spend in their lives—and this says nothing of prisoners who have severe mental illness and, hence, may suffer more greatly as a result of imprisonment (e.g., Gawande, 2009; Haney, 2003). The psychological toll this experience takes thus also suggests the importance of shifts in the amount of time that men are subjected to the pains imposed by their imprisonment (Wildeman and Muller, 2012).

The amount of time individuals spend marked (Pager, 2003, 2007)—not imprisoned but carrying the marks of being both a felon and an ex-prisoner—is also of the utmost importance, and for two reasons. First, of all the research on the collateral consequences of mass imprisonment, nearly all of it has focused heavily on how having ever been imprisoned affects the life-chances not only of the men who experience imprisonment, but also those tied to them (for recent reviews, see Wakefield and Uggen, 2010; Wildeman and Muller, 2012). Given the intense interest in these consequences, it is somewhat surprising that we have little sense just how much time men in contemporary society can expect to spend in this historically novel life-stage (for a parallel argument, see Pettit and Western, 2004). Yet time spent as a felon and an ex-prisoner is also important for another reason: Because the time spent in this status, more than nearly any other, conveys upon an individual semi-legal status, much like being on the run from the law, that discourages pro-social behavior and the formation of

[2] Although Massoglia et al. (2014) show null effects of a history of incarceration on men's risk of mortality, macro-level research nonetheless suggests that increases in incarceration diminish male life expectancy (Wildeman, 2012).