

Criminal justice involvement and high school completion [☆]

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the relationships between juvenile justice system interactions and high school graduation. When controlling for a large set of observable and unobservable characteristics, arrested and incarcerated individuals are about 11 and 26 percentage points, respectively, less likely to graduate high school than non-arrested individuals. However, the effect of arrest is not robust to there being relatively little selection on unobservable characteristics. In contrast, the incarceration effect is less sensitive to such selection and therefore more likely to at least partially represent a real effect. The remainder of the paper explores the mechanisms underlying this incarceration effect, including hypotheses of an education impeding stigma and disruptions in human capital accumulation.

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1. Introduction

In the United States, large numbers of juveniles interact with the justice system each year. There were more than 7000 arrests per 100,000 individuals aged ten to seventeen in 2000 and more than 100,000 juveniles in residential placement on any given day in 1999 (or approximately 0.3 percent of the population aged ten to seventeen) (Easy Access to FBI Arrest Statistics, 2006; Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement, 2005). Juvenile crime is especially problematic in US cities.

According to the 2005 Uniform Crime Reports, more than twice as much crime occurred in cities as in suburban areas. There were almost 60,000 violent crime arrests and 260,000 property crime arrests of individuals under age 18 in cities; suburban areas had just 24,000 and 114,000 juvenile violent and property crime arrests, respectively (Crime in the United States 2005, US Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2006). The prevalence of crime in urban areas is not just restricted to juveniles. From 1993 to 1998, the violent crime rate in urban areas was about 74 percent higher than the rural rate and 37 percent higher than the suburban rate (Urban, Suburban, and Rural Victimization, 1993–1998, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000).

Yet, while there is a fairly extensive literature concerned with the relationship between arrest and incar-

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ceration and labor market outcomes,¹ research addressing whether there is a causal link between such justice system interactions and education is much more limited. This is quite surprising given the abundant evidence indicating the social and economic importance of education in an individual's life.² In addition, lower amounts of education are associated with large external costs; Cohen (1998) estimates that the total loss suffered by society over the lifetime of the average high school dropout is between \$243,000 and \$388,000.

Moreover, previous research may underestimate the impact of justice system interactions on labor market outcomes. For instance, incarceration could both directly and indirectly influence employment status. The stigma of having a criminal record may directly decrease an individual's employment opportunities. But, if incarceration negatively impacts an individual's educational attainment, then he will also have fewer employment opportunities because of his lesser education, thereby capturing the indirect effect of incarceration on employment.³

A handful of fairly recent studies in the criminology literature have found evidence of a negative relationship between justice system interactions and education outcomes (Bernburg and Krohn, 2003; De Li, 1999; Hannon, 2003; Sweeten, 2006; Tanner et al., 1999). For the most part, these studies focus on arrest and say little about more serious interactions with the justice system. While Sweeten (2006) finds a significant negative relationship between education and court involvement over and above arrest, he does not distinguish between the different types of more serious justice system interactions (e.g. court appearance, conviction, incarceration,

etc.). In addition, one cannot confidently attach a causal interpretation to the results of these studies. Such an interpretation is complicated by the possibility that the observation of a negative correlation can be explained by the existence of unobserved individual characteristics that simultaneously place offenders at high risk of both interactions with the justice system and low education outcomes. For instance, an individual with poor judgment may be likely to commit crimes and be arrested as well as to drop out of school.

Whereas this previous literature focused on arrest, one of the key contributions of the current study is its attempt to identify the marginal effects of arrest, charge, conviction, and incarceration on high school graduation. A second contribution is the utilization of an empirical design that offers guidance on identifying whether the observed relationships represent a real impact or whether they are simply capturing unobservables. Specifically, using the 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, I control for a large set of individual characteristics as well as state level unobservables; previous research included minimal controls. Significant negative relationships between high school graduation and arrest and incarceration persist with this full set of controls. However, techniques proposed by Altonji et al. (2005) to assess the sensitivity of these relationships to selection on unobservables imply that the effect of arrest is not robust to relatively little selection on the unobservables. In contrast, the incarceration effect is less sensitive to such selection and therefore more likely to at least partially represent a real effect.

The third contribution of this paper is its attempt to identify the mechanisms underlying the incarceration result. This is essential to create criminal justice policies that minimize the amount of crime committed without having any negative externalities. Mechanisms that will be considered in the analysis include:

- (i) the quality of schooling while incarcerated,
- (ii) disruptions in human capital accumulation as juveniles are absent from school, and
- (iii) stigmas placed on delinquents by fellow students and teachers.⁴

Mixed evidence is found with regards to the underlying mechanism and is at least partially consistent with multiple hypotheses.

¹ See Grogger (1995), Waldfogel (1994), Lott (1990), Freeman (1992), Western and Beckett (1999), Nagin and Waldfogel (1995), Kling (2006).

² Card (1999) provides an excellent overview of research concerned with identifying the causal effect of education on earnings. Lochner and Moretti (2004) find causal evidence that completing high school reduces an individual's probability of incarceration for both blacks and whites. Grossman and Kaestner (1997) and Lleras-Muney (2002) find a positive relationship between education and health outcomes.

³ This concern would be particularly valid for studies based on individuals who were incarcerated as juveniles, as in the 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY79). Because participants of the NLSY79 were aged 14 to 22 at the time of the first interview and because the NLSY79 only asks detailed questions about crime and interactions with the justice system in the second survey round, a majority of respondents are still juveniles who have not yet completed their education. Thus, Freeman's (1992) findings that arrest has no effect and that juvenile incarceration decreases the chances of employment in all subsequent years by more than twelve percent may be underestimated.

⁴ There are, of course, additional potential mechanisms that I do not directly consider. For example, individuals may receive a 'criminal' education from their peers while incarcerated (Bayer et al., 2007).

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