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Consequences of Family Member Incarceration: Impacts on Civic Participation and Perceptions of the Legitimacy and Fairness of Government

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Abstract

Political participation and citizens' perceptions of the legitimacy and fairness of government are central components of democracy. In this article, we examine one possible threat to these markers of a just political system: family member incarceration. We offer a unique glimpse into the broader social consequences of punishment that are brought on by a partner's or parent's incarceration. We argue that the criminal justice system serves as an important institution for political socialization for the families of those imprisoned, affecting their attitudes and orientations toward the government and their will and capacity to become involved in political life. We draw from ethnographic data collected by one of the authors, quantitative data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, and interviews with recently released male prisoners and their female partners. Our findings suggest that experiences of a family member's incarceration complicate perceptions of government legitimacy and fairness and serve as a barrier to civic participation.

Keywords

political socialization; mass incarceration; legitimacy; fairness; prisoners' families

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> For the most part the system in America isn't interested in assisting people of color. … It's not even subliminal anymore, but there's this really *obvious* system whose main objective in spite of what you might think or hear or they say, is to, if not straight-out eradicate people of color, to make life on this planet as difficult for them as possible, and I think that that's exemplified in America.
>
> —Aisha, 46-year-old wife of a man serving a life sentence

Political participation is a central component of the democratic process, and trust in the legitimacy and fairness of the government contributes to feelings of full citizenship. Scholars argue that the increase in incarceration has harmed the democratic process, exacerbating barriers to political participation within a marginalized segment of the population and fueling further distrust of the criminal justice and political systems (Uggen and Manza 2002; Weaver and Lerman 2010). Indeed, researchers highlight the increasingly

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"invisible" nature of a population that is already underrepresented and overlooked in the political arena (Pettit 2012). Similar to other institutions, we argue that the "peculiar institution" of the correctional system (Wacquant 2000) serves as an agent of political socialization not just in the lives of offenders but also in the lives of their families (Flanagan 2003). As evidenced in Aisha's quote above, belief and participation in the political system may be just as tenuous for family members and romantic partners of incarcerated people as it is for those in, or recently released from, punitive confinement.

In this article we argue that the correctional system serves as a powerful institution for political socialization for the families of those behind bars, influencing, for example, their proclivity to vote and their political attitudes. Similar to the role of schools (Justice and Meares, this volume) and the military (Sapiro 2004), the correctional system becomes a primary mode of political socialization for families of the incarcerated, particularly as they adjust to penal facilities in ways that alienate them from other socializing institutions. We also explore how family member incarceration helps to shape perceptions of the criminal justice system and the government, which we see as intimately related to civic engagement. In short, we argue that having a family member incarcerated can have enduring repercussions for sociopolitical attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions.

Families of the Incarcerated and the Consequences they Bear

Correctional institutions often do not collect information on inmates' familial or social relationships. Also, non–marital partnerships and the parenting of children from a partner's previous relationships typically are not recorded. In addition, few nationally representative surveys ask respondents about the imprisonment experiences of family members. This makes it difficult to provide statistics on the exact number of inmates with family members affected by their incarceration, or demographics of people who experience a loved one's incarceration. The most robust data available concern children. In 2007, about 1.7 million children in the U.S. had a parent incarcerated, comprising 2.3 percent of the U.S. population under the age of 18 (Glaze and Muraschak 2010). Importantly, black children are more than six times more likely to have a parent incarcerated than are white children (Wildeman 2009).

Determining how many people experience the incarceration of their romantic partner is even more complex. Approximately 17 percent of state and federal prisoners report being married, with a nearly equal number reporting being divorced (Glaze and Muraschak 2010). However, marital status is likely to be an unreliable gauge of inmates' romantic involvements, especially given that inmates are less likely to be married than the general public (Western 2006). In fact, some studies indicate that approximately 50 percent of incarcerated men consider themselves to be in committed heterosexual relationships and intend to return to their partners upon release (Grinstead, Zack, and Faigeles 1999). Although the prevalence of women with incarcerated partners has not been systematically documented, 7 percent of the 4,349 female respondents in the National Sexual Health Survey (a national household probability sample) reported having a male primary partner who had been in prison or jail. In addition, a study of low-income urban African American mothers found that 22 percent had a current sexual partner who had been incarcerated (Battle et al. 1996).

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Having an incarcerated family member affects multiple domains of life, including economic hardship, family dynamics, and emotional well-being. The removal of an adult family member from a household may involve a loss in monetary contributions from that individual. In addition, during a relative's incarceration increased expenses are incurred as family members attempt to stay in contact with the loved one by visiting (which requires travel expenses and possibly time off from work), calling (typically via expensive collect calls), and sending packages to supplement food and hygiene supplies (Braman 2004; Comfort 2008; Grinstead et al. 2001). Research on the effects of parental incarceration also finds that the incarceration of a parent is associated with economic hardship, increased risk of homelessness, and residential instability (Geller, Garfinkel, and Western 2011; Hagan and Dinovitzer 1999; Hinds 1982; Schwartz-Soicher, Geller, and Garfinkel 2011; Wildeman, this volume). Once released, former inmates are likely to confront difficulties resuming prior employment or securing new employment and may suffer wage penalties for any job attained (Western 2002). As such, contributions to the household may remain diminished (Geller, Garfinkel, and Western 2011; Western 2002; Western 2006), and any legal debt incurred both during and after court proceedings can compound these difficulties (Harris, Evans, and Beckett 2010).

Of course, poverty and other forms of economic instability and disadvantage also typically precede incarceration (Nesmith and Ruhland 2008). As highlighted in many of the articles in this volume, the “hyper-incarceration” of the modern era is targeted primarily at the lower class (Wacquant 2010), such that many families are already living in economically precarious situations prior to a relative's arrest (Johnson and Waldfogel 2004; Rose and Clear 2003). However, research suggests that family member incarceration stands to worsen or generate additional economic hardship.

Incarceration also impacts family dynamics along multiple dimensions (Comfort 2007; Hagan and Dinovitzer 1999; Nurse 2002). Risk of relationship strain and union dissolution is high during the incarceration period (Lopoo and Western 2005), which can lead to increased emotional stress and sexual health risks (Girshick 1996; Khan et al. 2011; Thomas et al. 2008). For children, the loss of a parent to the prison system can create emotional strain and impose adult responsibilities, such as earning money for the household or taking care of younger siblings, upon them (Braman 2004). Relatedly, incarceration may also lead to feelings of shame and stigmatization among friends and family members (Braman 2004; Fishman 1990; Green et al. 2006; May 2000; Nesmith and Ruhland 2008; Phillips and Gates 2011). People may feel compelled to hide the fact that a partner or parent is incarcerated, particularly when interacting with people such as employers, social workers, teachers, and others who may not be members of groups highly impacted by incarceration. Women also experience humiliation, fear, and stigma at the hands of correctional staff when visiting their incarcerated partners (Christian 2005; Comfort et al. 2005; Fishman 1990; Girshick 1996), and ethnographic research suggests that families experience feelings of hopelessness, frustration, and powerlessness during these times (Braman 2004; Daniel and Barrett 1981; Gabel 1992; Girshick 1996; Hannon, Martin, and Martin 1984; Parke and Clarke-Stewart 2003). Ethnographic research also highlights the complexities in responses to family member incarceration, which are often neither all negative nor all positive, but nearly always a focal issue in family dynamics (Comfort 2007, 2008).

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Taken together, the multi-faceted consequences of family member incarceration reflect a complex landscape for the children and romantic partners of incarcerated men. The economic, relational, and emotional repercussions of family member incarceration described above further marginalize largely poor and racial/ethnic minority families from multiple dimensions of social and civic life.

Consequences for Political and Civic Engagement

We posit two primary mechanisms through which family member incarceration may influence political and community engagement: (1) indirectly via the transmission of behaviors and attitudes from the incarcerated loved one to other family members and (2) directly through a partner's or child's own experiences with the correctional system. The first perspective suggests that family members may be influenced by the attitudes and behaviors of the loved one who has been or is currently incarcerated, while the second highlights the importance of secondary prisonization and direct experiences with the criminal justice system among family members in shaping outlooks and behaviors.

Transmission

An expansive body of research investigates the forces driving political and civic similarities within the family. Most work focuses on parent-child similarity (Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers 2009; Verba, Schlozman, and Burns 2005), although recent studies examine this phenomenon in spousal relationships (Stoker and Jennings 2005; Alford et al. 2011). In both cases, a key mechanism purported to underlie family similarity is *transmission*, or social influence. Spouses and parents can actively persuade or encourage family members to adopt certain sociopolitical dispositions, or family members may be influenced passively as a result of observing and interpreting cues from their loved ones.

With respect to parent-child transmission, parents can actively socialize their children by speaking to them about certain political issues (Gimpel, Lay, and Schuknecht 2003) or exposing them to political and community events (Verba, Schlozman, and Burns 2005). They may more passively socialize their children, as children may model their own behavior and attitudes by observing parental cues about the importance of politics. For example, parents who vote and who discuss politics in the home are more likely to have politically engaged children (Plutzer 2002; Pacheco and Plutzer 2008). Studies suggest that the success of transmission may vary depending on the accuracy of a child's perception of his or her parents (Westholm 1999), concordance among parents (Jennings and Niemi 1968), and the dynamics of the relationship between parents and children more generally, which may be particularly important in the context of an incarcerated parent (Valentino and Sears 1998). Taken together this body of research indicates that parents do indeed have the potential to exert strong and lasting influence on the political, civic, and social orientations of their children.

While it is not possible for parents to select like-minded children, it is possible for individuals to select like-minded partners. This raises the added issue of disentangling selection from causal processes in political similarity between partners, or spouses, as most studies in this area focus on marital partners. However, previous research finds evidence of

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spousal influence and concordance with respect to party identification, vote choice, and issues with strong moral elements, such as abortion and marijuana legalization (Alford et al. 2011; Jennings and Stoker 2001).

The incarceration of a family member may be a salient force in the political and civic lives of children and romantic partners given that many former inmates are prohibited from voting either permanently or for an extended period of time. Indeed, one in forty adults cannot vote due to a felony conviction, and as many as one in four black men are disenfranchised in some states (Manza and Uggen 2006). Interviews also suggest that ex-felons may not vote for longer periods of time than what is mandated by law due to misperceptions about their eligibility (Uggen and Manza 2004). A small, but growing, body of research suggests that felon disenfranchisement laws impact the political participation of non-felons, leading to reduced voting participation for entire communities (Bowers and Preuhs 2009; Burch, this volume; Uggen and Manza 2002).

The incarceration of a family member is somewhat unique to these more traditional ideas of transmission of political values and behaviors because it is not only the political attitudes of family members that may be transmitted, but also the actual "sharing" of the incarceration experience through visiting or maintaining contact that may have powerful socializing effects on attitudes and behaviors.

Secondary prisonization

Ethnographic work documents that the correctional system plays a central role in the lives of individuals with a family member behind bars (Comfort 2008). Waiting for hours to see a loved one without an explanation for the delay, spending long days locked in stuffy or inadequately furnished visiting rooms, and being chastised for not abiding by correctional rules that change unexpectedly and arbitrarily are all examples of the ways in which the correctional system communicates a status of degraded citizenship to family members (Christian 2005; Comfort et al. 2005; Fishman 1990). We argue that such experiences are particularly salient in the political socialization of individuals who are legally free and not the primary targets of punitive sanctions, for whom being repeatedly treated in a disparaging manner by correctional authorities erodes their belief in the fairness of the government as a whole. In addition, contending with and strategizing around correctional policies and practices absorbs a substantial amount of time and energy, which may diminish family members' engagement with other social institutions and lead to perceptions that all state entities are adversarial and unconcerned with the well-being of poor and ethnic minority populations. In the words of Butta, a 32-year-old wife of a prisoner: "Why do they make the rules? And then, they can just go through the book and say, 'Well we're gonna change it to this this day,' and then two weeks later they changing the rules again. … That's why the system sucks. The jails suck. You know, they hardly, they're not even trying to *re*habilitate, they're trying to create more problems!"

As noted, numerous hardships typically precede incarceration, and socioeconomically disadvantaged groups are already more likely to have a fatalistic mentality and to be less future-oriented (Lyons 1970). People affected by a family member's incarceration may already feel disenchanted with the democratic process and perceive attempts to improve

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their (or their loved one's) life circumstances as futile. It stands to reason that any harm to financial or family well-being due to a relative's incarceration could worsen fatalism within the family, building on a history of negative experiences with authorities and "the system" that resulted concretely in increased disadvantage and thereby cultivated feelings of hopelessness, cynicism, and powerlessness. Not surprisingly, fatalistic attitudes have been observed among former inmates themselves, who perceive their futures as largely out of their control and that incarceration serves as a "scarlet letter, leaving them permanently marked or 'branded'" (Uggen, Manza, and Behrens 2004, 280; Maruna 2001). If the family members of inmates or former inmates have felt "secondarily prisonized" (Comfort 2008) alongside their loved ones, they too may feel a loss of control over their lives and identity.

In summary, we argue that the criminal justice system operates as an agent of political socialization, just as other institutions such as schools and churches (Easton and Dennis 1969; Flanagan 2003). In many ways, the correctional system serves as the primary mode of political socialization for the family members of incarcerated people, through both the indirect experiences of their incarcerated family members, and the direct experiences of economic and social adversity and intimate engagement with the penal system as a non-prisoner. We postulate that it is these experiences in toto that have an impact on perceptions of justice, fairness, and the degree of trust that family members can place in government, thereby shaping motivations for political and civic participation. Perceptions of legitimacy and fairness may be distorted when witnessing reduced rights of incarcerated fathers and partners, or when having personal experiences with restricted rights that decrease autonomy and convey second-class citizenship. Devoting substantial amounts of time and economic and social resources to the prison system may make families feel shut out and alienated from other institutions of political socialization (for example, if a woman spends her weekends visiting an incarcerated husband, she may avoid socializing at her workplace to avoid accounting for her whereabouts). This also may divert time and energy that otherwise could be invested in institutions such as houses of worship, adult education courses, or political organizations. In other words, the power of other institutions—such as schools, churches, and the government—as socializing forces becomes blunted for these families through their absorption into the correctional system.

In the following we draw from our quantitative and qualitative data to show the ways in which family member incarceration serves to compromise political participation for the children and female partners of incarcerated and recently released men.

Methods

Data

To test our hypotheses, we use three data sources: the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) (which we do not describe in detail because it is well-known; but see Appendix and Harris 2011), the Relate Project, and ethnographic data.

The Relate Project—Data for the Relate Project (R01MH078743) were collected between January 2009 and February 2011 in Oakland and San Francisco, California. Interviews were conducted with 172 male-female couples in which the male partner had

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been recently released from prison. Participants were recruited using street outreach methods, venue-based presentations, and flyers. Eligibility criteria included both parties being 18 years of age or older, that they were in a relationship together during the man's most recent incarceration and at the time of eligibility screening, and the man being able to provide documentation of release between three to 12 months prior to eligibility screening. Couples came to the study appointment together and were interviewed separately. Our analysis uses data from the female respondents in the sample with no missing data on the variables examined (N=164).

Qualitative interview data—To contextualize and add depth to the quantitative results, we also draw on ethnographic fieldwork and qualitative interviews from a series of interrelated studies conducted by the third author between 2000 and 2011. These studies focused on women who were visiting male partners incarcerated in a California state prison and women who were participating in the Relate Project. For detailed accounts of the methods for each of these studies, see Comfort (2008, 2012) and Comfort et al. (2005).

Measures

Add Health

Parental Incarceration: At the wave 4 interview, respondents were asked if they had ever experienced the incarceration of a biological parent. If so, they were asked to provide their age when a parent was admitted and then released.

aaOutcome variables: *Political activism* is measured at wave 3 using five dichotomous indicators: *voter registration, vote in last election, attended rally* (in the previous 12 months), *campaign contribution* (in the past 12 months), and *government contact* (whether a respondent contacted the government about a political issue in the previous 12 months). Trust in the government is also measured at wave 3 using a scale combining three items: level of trust for local, state, and federal government. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the following statement: I trust the (federal, local, state) government. Answers follow a Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). The scores across these items were reverse-coded and summed to create a scale ranging from 3–15 (α=.93).

Perceived discrimination is measured at wave 4 using the following survey item, “*In your day-to-day life, how often do you feel you have been treated with less respect or courtesy than other people?*” Responses range from 0 (never) to 3 (often). These responses were transformed into a dichotomous variable, where 0 indicates never/rarely and 1 indicates a respondent perceives disrespect sometimes/often. Because this variable is measured at wave 4, we use parental incarceration by wave 4 as the predictor variable in our analysis. Community service is measured at wave 3 using a dichotomous variable indicating whether the respondent engaged in any nonpaid volunteer or *community service* work over the past 12 months.

Demographic measures and controls: Demographic controls include *race/ethnicity, age, sex*, and *foreign-born* status. In addition, analyses control for *educational attainment* by

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wave 3 and whether a parent reported that the family received public assistance in the last 12 months at wave 1. Finally, models control for *parent civic engagement* and respondent contact with the criminal justice system. Parents were also asked whether they were currently involved with a “civic or social organization, such as Junior League, Rotary, or Knights of Columbus.” Research shows that parental incarceration is associated with a higher likelihood of criminal involvement among their children (van de Rakt, Nieuwbeerta, and de Graaf 2008). Therefore, higher levels of distrust, perceived discrimination, and lower levels of civic participation may reflect personal experiences with the criminal justice system rather than, or in addition to, familial incarceration. As such, models control for whether a respondent has ever been *stopped by police* or incarcerated by the wave 3 interview. See Appendix Table A1 for more detailed descriptions of variables used in the Add Health analyses.

Relate—*Attitudes toward the criminal justice system* were examined using a series of questions provided in Appendix Table A2 (Rose and Clear 2004; Tyler 2006).

Demographic Measures: Demographic measures include *age, race/ethnicity*, and *education*. We also examine institutional history: ever living in foster care or a group home prior to the age of 18, number of family members ever incarcerated (other than Relate partner), any family member currently or ever incarcerated (other than Relate partner), parent or step parent currently or ever incarcerated, and own incarceration history (never imprisoned; jail only; prison; and number of times in jail, state prison, and federal prison).

Analysis

Add Health: The association between family member incarceration and political participation, community service, government trust, and perceived discrimination is assessed using traditional covariate adjustment models. While most analyses require the use of logistic regressions, we used linear regression to examine the relationships between familial incarceration and trust in the government, and perceived discrimination.

Relate: Because all the females in the Relate sample have recently experienced the release of their male partner from prison, we provide a descriptive portrait of these women's views regarding criminal-justice authorities. This is done in an effort to provide a general understanding of their social landscape and a more nuanced understanding of attitudes about trust that are unavailable in Add Health.

Results

Add Health

Descriptive statistics for variables used in the Add Health analysis are shown in Appendix Table A3. Thirteen percent of respondents had experienced the incarceration of a parent by wave 3. Among these respondents, the vast majority experienced the incarceration of a father only (79 percent), while 12 percent experienced the incarceration of a mother only, and 9 percent had both a father and a mother incarcerated. Certain types of civic engagement, such as attending political rallies, contributing money to a campaign, and

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contacting the government, are quite rare among all respondents. Two to 3 percent of all respondents engaged in these activities during the 12 months prior to the interview. On the other hand, 30–43 percent of respondents engaged in some type of community service or voted in the last presidential election.

Appendix Table A3 also shows mean values for variables across those who experienced parental incarceration and those who did not. According to these estimates, children of incarcerated parents are more socioeconomically disadvantaged and less civically engaged than are their counterparts. They are less likely to be registered to vote, less likely to have voted in the last presidential election, less likely to engage in community service, exhibit lower trust in the government, and are more likely to perceive discrimination. Children of incarcerated parents are also far more likely to have parents who were not civically engaged and who received public assistance. By wave 3, almost one in every five respondents who had a parent incarcerated had also been incarcerated themselves.

Logistic regression estimates of the associations between parental incarceration and measures of civic engagement and perceived discrimination are shown in Table 1. Estimates are derived from models including all control variables. All else equal, estimates indicate that respondents who experienced the incarceration of a parent were less likely to vote in the last presidential election, more likely to feel discriminated against in their daily lives, and exhibit less trust in the government on average. The odds of voting are 33 percent higher for respondents who did not have a parent incarcerated (see Appendix Table A8 for full model). Among those who have had a parent incarcerated, the odds of perceiving discrimination are 27 percent higher than those who did not (see Appendix Table A12 for full model).

Experiencing parental incarceration is associated with a –.621-unit decrease in trust on a scale of 13 (see Table A5 for full model). Results indicate that parental incarceration is not a significant predictor of other outcomes, including registering to vote, engaging in community service, attending political rallies, contributing money to a campaign, or contacting the government (see Appendix Tables A6, A7, A9, A10, and A11).

Even after adjusting extensively for other factors,[i] parental contact with a correctional institution still emerged as a significant predictor of trust in government, voting, and perceived discrimination when controlling for these confounders. Taken together, these findings suggest that having a parent incarcerated may present a unique and distinct threat to civic engagement and shape attitudes toward the government.

While these findings help to establish a link between parental incarceration and these outcomes, this analysis also raises questions as to the underlying processes driving these associations. As such, the following section provides a qualitative and descriptive approach to these questions by exploring the experiences of individuals who have had a family member incarcerated. This qualitative component to our study helps to provide context on

[i]We also investigated whether any association was contingent on race or a respondent's own incarceration. These associations were non-significant. However, the relative effect size of parent vs. respondent incarceration varied across models. Respondent incarceration was a non-significant predictor of perceived discrimination (see Appendix Table A12), a weaker correlate of government trust (Table A5), and was more strongly related to voting (see Table A8). A respondent's personal exposure to incarceration may be a more salient predictor of voting due to felon disenfranchisement laws.

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precisely how such experiences can alter political and civic participation, as well as attitudes toward the criminal justice system and the government as a whole.

Relate results

Demographic information for the females in the Relate sample is provided in Appendix Table A4. Over half of these women have also been incarcerated, primarily in jail. Eighty-five percent of women have had or currently have at least one family member incarcerated other than their romantic partner. In addition, almost one-third of these women have experienced a parent incarcerated. This information highlights the many ways these women are tied to the criminal justice system and reflect "systems failures," as they and their loved ones are repeatedly "handled" by corrections rather than by social welfare. Celina, a 23-year-old woman with an incarcerated boyfriend with whom she had two children stated: "[Prison] can't be working if people are returning, if it's like, you let 'em out and they're coming back again. So something has to be wrong. I mean, there is certain things that are wrong with the person that make them have to go back to jail, but there are also society factors and stuff like that that, you know, doesn't help that at all."

Table 2 provides information on attitudes toward police, correctional and parole officers, and judges. Results indicate a general ambivalence and distrust toward authorities, similar to other research that has investigated these attitudes among individuals who have known someone who has been incarcerated. For example, nearly half of participants indicated that they had little to no respect for police officers, correctional officers, and parole officers. Further, 47 percent of participants felt that the criminal justice system does not treat people fairly, and 40 percent thought that a "medium amount" to "a great deal" of people are wrongly convicted. By contrast, a 2011 Gallup poll indicated that only 29 percent of Americans had little to no confidence in the criminal justice system (Saad 2011). Alice, a 22-year-old woman, described how her husband's experience being detained by the police for double-parking while dropping off a friend shaped her attitudes about the fairness of the criminal justice system:

> Even though he didn't do nothing wrong they just wanted to pick on him, they put him in the back of the police car for a *hour*, and he didn't do nothing—they put handcuffs on him, just because of his past [arrest history]. … They ended up lettin' him go! Cuz they didn't have nothing on him, but they were just being mean to him because of his past! And I don't feel that that's right you know? He didn't do anything. But, they do that a lot. They do that a lot. But what can you do about it? Nothing. You really can't do nothing about it, but go with the flow.

Another woman, 21-year-old Crystal, spoke similarly about her lack of faith in the criminal justice system due to her observations of how people wind up behind bars:

> They just have too many people in prison that shouldn't be here … there's a lot that's in prison because they didn't have an adequate lawyer, or they couldn't afford it, so they got a public defender that didn't *care*, you know, or that went along with the DA or somethin' an' that's how they got here! … Our justice system, *I* don't even feel like we *have* a justice system anymore. Cuz I mean, it's crazy. I feel like everybody should be treated equal in the justice system, even if you have a lot of

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> money, and even if you don't have *no* money. Cuz I mean, it's like what kind of justice system do we have if I can get off of a case because I have more money?

Similar to the findings on the young adult children of incarcerated parents in the Add Health sample, patterns from the Relate data and qualitative interviews reflect that female partners of incarcerated men experience diminished levels of trust in the government and authorities. These fatalistic attitudes emerge from personal experiences with discrimination and injustice from authority figures, disproportionate experience with social and economic hardship, as well as familial and sometimes personal legacies of contact with the criminal justice system, particularly among women of color. These experiences have clear implications for attitudes around fairness, with women often feeling marginalized and set up to fail. These attitudes are poignantly highlighted by Celina, who was parenting her two young children alone after her boyfriend returned to prison for a parole violation and lost his job at Home Depot:

> I don't think that people understand when you're like, stripped of everything, and you work so hard for it, it's like … "Well why should I work hard? Why should I do this? Why should I do *anything*? Why should I *obey* the laws if, you know, this is what it's gonna get me?" [S]ometimes you just think to yourself, "Well maybe he could have gone to a program or something like that and you know, got help that way." [Instead of] making him go to a place where he'd lose his job and have to start from scratch all over again, and you *know* how hard it is for an ex-felon to *get* a job, so, it just makes you mad. … I can see if he wasn't doing nothing and he was giving dirty [drug] tests, and doing all bad things and, doing everything crazy, but, this man was riding a bicycle back and forth to work, to Home Depot, you know, doing everything correct, or legit, for the first time.

Conclusion

Our findings lead to sobering conclusions about the far-reaching consequences of America's high rate of incarceration and criminal justice contact for American citizenship and civic life. We show that it is not only those who are incarcerated that face barriers to political participation, but also their families, particularly their partners and children. Moreover, the impact of parental incarceration is enduring, as evidence of distrust in government and reduced political participation for the children of incarcerated men and women are found in adulthood.

Our analysis paints a picture of a group of individuals perpetually marginalized from the institutions that serve as agents of political socialization for others. Somewhat ironically, families of incarcerated people experience reduced economic and social well-being while at the same time becoming increasingly marginalized and alienated from the very institutions that ostensibly support economic and social progress. For these families, the prison system becomes a central institution of political socialization in the stead of educational, social service, military, or health institutions.

We acknowledge that the social context of family members is marked by multiple disadvantages pre- and post-incarceration. We suggest, however, that these experiences do not necessarily lead to a total retreat from civic engagement but rather lead to engagement in

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alternative forms of political behaviors. Our ethnographic work indicates that some women see maintaining contact with their incarcerated partner as a political act. Aisha, whom we quote at the beginning of this article, clearly articulates this point, while also indicating the degree to which supporting her incarcerated husband saps energy she might otherwise devote to the more "traditional" forms of political engagement that are typically captured by surveys. Aisha responded to a question about her political activities by saying:

> Maintaining and being and having the relationship with [my husband], just the *mental* part of dealing with his struggle, and his legal issues, is pretty consuming. … There's nobody that I'm ashamed to tell [about my husband's incarceration]. I don't have any shame about any of it. *None*. And, actually, I welcome talking to people about it. Because of the situation that he's in, and because I have such strong feelings about it politically. Not just him, but *all*, people in the incarceration process.

Moreover, as women learn to navigate and become part of the correctional system, investments in that institution may limit investment in others and change perceptions regarding the importance of other social institutions in their personal and family life. Many nuanced and small forms of microsocialization occur around the correctional system (e.g., visitation, letter writing, and receiving collect phone calls). To participate in traditional civic or political activities requires not only time and resources but also a macro view of political participation and the belief that other institutions have the potential to impact the lives of individuals and their families. This macro view may not be held by family members confronted by persistent adversity, for whom other institutions have already failed in their lives, and who must constantly contend with the correctional system to maintain contact with loved ones.

It is also important to note that a significant proportion of individuals who experience the incarceration of a parent or romantic partner have themselves been incarcerated, and many have other family members and people in their social networks embedded in the criminal justice system. For example, by WIII of the Add Health survey, 21 percent of respondents who experienced parental incarceration had themselves been incarcerated. By WIV, this increased to 31 percent. This suggests that teasing out vicarious effects from direct effects of family member incarceration will be a major challenge for researchers interested in this topic. Although we control for direct incarceration as well as contact with police in our analysis, it is likely that respondents are registering different attitudes from both sources. In addition, the effect of family member incarceration may be stronger or weaker for those who have passed through correctional facilities themselves. Although we found no evidence of an interaction between a respondent's own incarceration and his/her parents' incarceration in the Add Health sample (results not shown), this may also be a prudent direction for future research.

Our findings urge a reconsideration of the role of the correctional system in creating and maintaining inequality. If those connected to incarcerated people are unable or unwilling to participate in the democratic process, this ensures that the institutional and social factors (e.g., poverty, segregation, and poor educational systems) that increase risk of incarceration and foster negative consequences for families will remain unnoticed and unaddressed by

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political elites. It is imperative for governmental leaders and researchers to seriously evaluate the ways in which the incarceration of a family member not only reflects macro-level institutional failures but also serves to compound and perpetuate inequality among some of our most vulnerable populations.

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

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Table 1

Regression Estimates of the Associations between Parental Incarceration and Civic Participation at Wave 3 and Perceived Discrimination at Wave 4 for Add Health Sample

Variable	Estimate (Logistic Regression)	Standard Error
Registered to Vote	-.026	.100
Vote in Last Election	-.281	.088**
Attended a Political Rally	-.427	.275
Contributed Money to Campaign	-.46	.496
Contacted Government	-.195	.291
Engaged in Community Service	-.166	.105
Perceived Discrimination	.242	.097*

Variable	Estimate (OLS Regression)	Standard Error
Trust in Government	-.621	.114**

Notes: All models adjust for the influence of control variables (See Appendix, Table A1 for complete list)

** $p<.01$

* $p<.05$

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Table 2

Criminal Justice Attitudes among Relate Females (N=164)

Honesty of Criminal Justice Officials	Not honest at all	Slightly honest	Somewhat honest	Very honest	Extremely honest	Don't Know
Police Officers (in your neighborhood)	17%	32%	36%	12%	1%	2%
Parole Officers	13%	24%	38%	12%	4%	9%
Criminal Court Judges	9%	23%	42%	16%	4%	5%
Correctional Officers	18%	26%	43%	5%	----	9%

Respect for Criminal Justice Officials	No respect at all	A little respect	A medium amount of respect	A lot of respect	A great deal of respect	Don't Know
Police Officers (in your neighborhood)	14%	34%	25%	21%	5%	----
Parole Officers	12%	33%	26%	21%	5%	4%
Correctional Officers	15%	34%	29%	13%	4%	5%

General Respect or Disrespect for Criminal Justice Officials Because of the Way they Treat People	Extremely disrespected	Somewhat disrespected	Neither respected nor disrespected	Somewhat respected	Extremely respected	Don't Know
Police Officers (in your neighborhood)	23%	29%	27%	20%	1%	1%
Parole Officers	13%	32%	21%	23%	5%	7%
Correctional Officers	21%	35%	21%	13%	2%	7%

How Fairly the Criminal Justice System Treats People	Not at all fairly	Slightly fairly	Somewhat fairly	Very fairly	Extremely fairly	Don't Know
	23%	24%	44%	6%	3%	----

Upset that Police Can Stop People on the Streets and Require Them to Identify Themselves	Not upset at all	Slightly upset	Somewhat upset	Very upset	Extremely upset	Don't Know
	19%	12%	24%	23%	22%	----

How Hard or Easy The Criminal Courts are on People Accused of a Crime	Extremely hard	Somewhat/Slightly hard	Neither hard nor easy	Slightly/Somewhat easy	Extremely easy	Don't Know
	35%	34%/12%	10%	3%/2%	2%	1%

Number of People Convicted of Crimes who are Actually Innocent	None at all	A few	A medium amount	A lot	A great deal	Don't Know
	2%	54%	24%	12%	4%	2%