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Research Preview

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When Neighbors Go to Jail: Impact on Attitudes About Formal and Informal Social Control

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Criminologists typically study the impact of incarceration by investigating its effects on individual offenders. These studies are concerned almost exclusively with offenders' criminal behavior because they attempt to discern the rehabilitative, deterrent, and incapacitative effects of prison sentences. This approach rarely examines the impact of incarceration on community life as a whole because it assumes a simple, straightforward model: removing offenders leads to a safer, more desirable community.

As a system that removes individuals from their neighborhoods, incarceration may improve the quality of community life when only a few residents are removed. In neighborhoods that have many more offenders, however, removing these residents may disrupt the social networks that are the foundation of informal social control. Because high-incarceration neighborhoods are socially disorganized, their capacity to absorb these disruptions is limited. Thus, high levels of incarceration in some communities may leave them in worse condition than before because of the resulting disruptions in social organization.

In the aggregate, incarceration affects community life because offenders have roles in their neighborhoods that are unrelated to their criminal behavior. They are involved in local networks as family members, as economic consumers and producers, and in association with other neighbors.¹ Their removal from local networks often disrupts the local social order, diminishing the capacity of other residents to be effective agents of informal social control. In neighborhoods with many incarcerated residents, the aggregate effect of their absence can be noticeable for those who remain. Because in some

minority communities as many as 25 percent of male young adults are incarcerated at any given time,² and at the national level the lifetime probability of incarceration for African-Americans is higher than one in four,³ the study of the impact of high incarceration rates on the community is important, particularly for African-American communities.

One study, funded by the Open Society Institute, is investigating the secondary effects of high incarceration rates in Leon County (Tallahassee), Florida. The Leon County Neighborhoods and Crime Project is assessing the unintended consequences of incarceration policies on communities by analyzing the relationship between neighborhood incarceration rates and a variety of social indicators, including crime, attitudes about community quality of life, and attitudes about formal and informal social control mechanisms. The study has found important attitudinal differences between people who have been incarcerated or know someone who has been incarcerated and people who have no such exposure to incarceration.

Methodology

The study is measuring the impact of incarceration on structural indicators of community disorganization and on individual indicators of family and economic life. Researchers are investigating the relationship between direct and indirect exposure to the criminal justice system (by having been incarcerated or knowing someone who has been incarcerated) and attitudes toward social control. To collect these data, researchers gathered

information via a random-digit-dialing telephone survey of nearly 1,500 residents of Leon County, producing approximately 1,300 completed surveys. In addition to demographic information, questions addressed respondents' exposure to incarceration and attitudes about social control. Three levels of social control were assessed: public (the justice system), parochial (neighborhood-level control by neighborhood organizations and among friends and acquaintances), and private (among family members).⁴

Attitudes toward informal (parochial and private) social control were determined through questions drawn in part from the Chicago Neighborhood Project.⁵ These questions asked respondents to report how well they thought their neighbors controlled their children, disciplined them, or made them go to school. Respondents also were asked if they thought their neighbors would be willing to intervene if someone were breaking into their house, trying to sell drugs to their children, or being beaten. Formal (public) social control was assessed using questions about respondents' beliefs about police, judges, and the fairness of the criminal justice system. Experience with incarceration was determined by asking if the respondent had been incarcerated or knew someone who had been incarcerated.

Attitudes toward formal and informal social control are important for two reasons. First, strong informal social control requires that community members believe in and understand the legitimacy of the political world affecting them. If they perceive that the sociopolitical system addresses their needs, they will have more confidence in the legitimacy of that system. Second, people who believe in the legitimacy of social control mechanisms will be more likely to support those controls through their behavior, while people who do not will tend to be alienated from those structures and therefore be less likely to support them. Studies of individuals' experiences with the formal justice system find these experiences shape not only attitudes toward that system but also the willingness to comply with the authority of the justice system.⁶

Because of this connection, researchers are particularly interested in beliefs about "deficits" in social control. People who believe their neighbors are unlikely to engage in informal social control will feel less inclined to engage in informal social control themselves, and people whose evaluations of formal social control are negative will feel less incentive to obey laws. This study's central assumption is that people learn to think about the nature and extent of social control in their lives through their own experiences with formal social control mechanisms and those of their immediate family and peers.

Findings

In the survey of Leon County residents, 64 percent reported that they knew someone who had been incarcerated, and 9 percent of that group had been incarcerated themselves. These high numbers reflect the broadness of the question, which was written to include personal and indirect experience with prison or jail.

African-Americans were more likely to be exposed to incarceration than were non-African-Americans. They also had a lower general assessment of formal social control than others, and this remained true regardless of exposure to incarceration. With regard to attitudes about informal social control, exposure to incarceration made a difference. Among those not exposed to incarceration, African-Americans were more likely than non-African-Americans to have a negative assessment of informal social control. Among those exposed to prison, however, there was no difference between the races. Thus, exposure to incarceration diminished the differences between the races in attitudes toward informal social control.

Researchers also found that exposure to incarceration altered the way attitudes toward formal and informal social control were related. Among those exposed to prison, a negative assessment of formal social control led to a negative assessment of informal social control. The opposite pattern existed for those not exposed to incarceration. For this group, an inverse relationship existed in the relationship between assessments of the two forms of control. However, race played a role here too. Exposure to prison only affected the formal-informal social control linkage for non-African-Americans.

Thus, important differences exist between those who have been exposed to prison and those who have not. It appears that being exposed to prison does condition attitudes toward social control in general, and, consistent with the unintended consequences hypothesis, reduces confidence in the overall fairness of public control. Through these attitudes, exposure to prison reduces confidence in the effectiveness of informal social control. This raises the prospect that the consistent increase in the number of people going to prison since the 1970s, because this expansion has been concentrated in certain communities, has led to a deterioration in attitudes toward both formal and informal social control in those communities.

Further analysis and implications

Still uncertain is how the high incarceration rates in certain Leon County neighborhoods have altered aspects of neighborhood life. The Leon County Neighborhoods and Crime Project currently is mapping multiyear neighborhood data within the city of Tallahassee, so that the neighborhood-level effects of incarceration on attitudinal variables and crime can be assessed. Specific areas to be studied include the process by which informal social

control fails and crime flourishes and the impacts of incarceration on women remaining in the community, particularly those with children, in neighborhoods with high incarceration rates.

By documenting the unintended consequences of incarceration on community life in high-incarceration communities, this project will address a poorly understood problem in justice policy: how to use justice resources to promote greater quality of community life. This may be considered unconventional in that incarceration—that is, the removal of criminals—has usually been viewed as having only positive effects on communities through its impact on criminals. To the degree that high rates of removal of residents have secondary, unintended, negative consequences for communities, this research may point to important new considerations in crime policy. For instance, those who make formal social control policies might begin to look at the impact of incarceration on the lives and attitudes of the people offenders leave behind. Offenders' potential assets also might be considered in crime policy, as policymakers and criminal justice professionals realize that simply removing offenders is not solely a positive intervention.

Notes

1. Rose, Dina R., and Todd R. Clear, "Incarceration, Social Capital, and Crime: Implications for Social Disorganization Theory," *Criminology* 36 (3) (1998): 441–480.
2. Lynch, James P., and William J. Sabol, *Did Getting Tougher on Crime Pay?*, Crime Policy Report, Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute State Policy Center, 1997. Lynch, James P., and William J. Sabol, "Macro-Social Changes and Their Implications for Prison Reform: The Underclass and the Composition of Prison Populations," paper presented to the American Society of Criminology, New Orleans, Louisiana: November 5, 1992.
3. Bonczar, Thomas P., and Allen J. Beck, *Lifetime Likelihood of Going to State or Federal Prison*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, March 1997.

4. The study used Hunter's classifications of levels of social control. See Hunter, Albert J., "Private, Parochial and Public Social Orders: The Problem of Crime and Incivility in Urban Communities," in *The Challenge of Social Control: Citizenship and Institution Building in Modern Society*, ed. Gerald D. Suttles and Mayer N. Zald, Norwood, New Jersey: Aldex Publishing, 1985.

5. Elliott, Delbert S., William Julius Wilson, David Huizinga, Robert J. Sampson, Amanda Elliott, and Bruce Rankin, "The Effects of Neighborhood Disadvantage on Adolescent Development," *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 33 (4) (1996): 389–426.

6. Tyler, Tom, *Why People Obey the Law*, New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1990.

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