

The Effect of Paternal Incarceration on Material Hardship

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Extended Abstract

This paper uses Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study to examine the relationship between paternal incarceration and family's material hardship.

Theoretical Focus

Children in low-income families are at an increased risk for disadvantaged physical health and developmental outcomes. The absence of a biological parent from a child's life also adversely affects social and economic wellbeing. An incarceration of a father removes a parent involuntarily from his child's life and adds substantially to the financial strain the family faces. Therefore, paternal incarceration has a two-fold potential to increase a child's risk of disadvantage.

The recent sharp increase in incarceration rates, no less pronounced among parents, has raised concerns about the material well-being of the affected families. Incarceration was found to have significant deleterious effects on employment, earnings and relationship stability. Less is known, however, about the impact these negative effects have on the hardships faced by families in meeting their basic needs.

Data and Methods

The Fragile Families study follows a cohort of nearly 5,000 couples with children born between 1998 and 2000 in twenty large U.S. cities. The study systematically oversamples unmarried parents, but when weighted, is nationally representative of urban families with children. The study surveys both mothers and fathers at the time of their child's birth, with follow-up surveys conducted when the children are one, three, and five years old. The study was initially designed to address three areas of interest – non-marital childbearing, the role of fathers, and welfare reform – and their effects on family formation and children's wellbeing. It has since expanded to further examine the roles of social and material disadvantage.

Material Hardship

The dependent variable, material hardship, is an index that examines the extent to which families face difficulties meeting their basic needs when their children are approximately 5-years old. Our measure uses mothers' self reports of whether in the twelve months prior to the 5-year follow-up interview they could not pay full rent or mortgage, were evicted from their home due to non-payment of rent or mortgage, could not pay the full amount of utilities bill, needed to go to a doctor or a hospital but could not afford it, had a telephone service disconnected due to nonpayment, had electricity or gas service turned off, or heating oil not delivered. In addition, the measure of material hardship includes information on whether the respondent received free food or meals in the past 12 months. If a mother reports that the household experienced any of these measures the hardship measure was increased by one. The overall material hardship index ranges from 0 to 7.

Modeling Strategy

To assess the causal relationship between fathers' incarceration and family material hardship, we estimate a series of regression models that take advantage of the rich data available in Fragile Families, as well as the survey's panel structure. We first estimate a cross-sectional model examining the relationship between material hardship and fathers' incarceration history. These models minimize the effects of unobserved selection by controlling not only for parents' basic demographic characteristics (e.g., race, age, education, and marital status) but also for a rich set of potential confounders, not observed in most datasets (e.g., both parents' impulsivity, both parents' cognitive abilities, and multi-partner fertility.)

We further reduce the possibility of selection by examining a sub-sample of the families where we know the father to have been incarcerated between the third and fifth-year follow-up surveys. In these families, we can observe the experience of hardship both before and after the fathers' most recent incarceration, and note changes that follow the incarceration. We also estimate individual fixed effects models that focus exclusively on within-family changes in both fathers' incarceration and material hardship.

We next test for the possibility that family's hardship may lead to father's involvement in illegal activity, which may lead to his incarceration (reverse causality.) We perform a placebo test by which we use material hardship from the fifth-year follow-up surveys to predict incarceration in the two-year period that preceded it. The temporal ordering of the variables suggests that any observed relationships in these models result from unobserved heterogeneity between the families with and without a recent incarceration. Null relationships, however, would suggest that the relationships observed in earlier models are due to a causal effect of father's incarceration on family's hardship.

Finally, we compare the experience of hardship of families whose fathers are absent from the household due to incarceration, to those whose fathers are absent for other reasons.

Preliminary Findings

Preliminary findings suggest that the incarceration of a father indeed does increase hardship for families. Father's incarceration contributes to hardship not only by reduced income, but also by seriously disrupted household relationships and routines. We find that the experience of hardship may also result from events beyond lack of economic resources (e.g. poor personal management skills.) Finally, the experience of hardship is deeper for families whose fathers are incarcerated as compared to families whose fathers are absent for other reasons.