

## A Sort of Homecoming: The effects of incarceration on men's housing stability

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### Theoretical Focus

As early as 1892, the federal government conducted national investigations of urban slums focusing on housing conditions (HUD 2007), and agencies at the federal, state, and local levels have recognized the importance of identifying strategies to meet the housing needs of individuals, families, and communities. Implicit in the government's focus on the availability of safe, affordable housing is that its value for individuals and society far exceeds its monetary worth. Housing stability has long been recognized as an input into the economic, physical, and emotional health of individuals and their communities. Various aspects of housing insecurity such as evictions, frequent moves, difficulty paying rent, spending more than 50% of household income on housing, doubling up or living in overcrowded conditions have been significantly associated with adverse outcomes, including postponed medical care and increased use of acute services among children and adults (Ma et al. 2008, Reid et al. 2008, Kushel et al. 2006).

Stable housing has been shown to be of particular importance for populations that are vulnerable in other aspects of their life. For example, access to stable housing has been cited as a key support for women facing intimate partner violence (Postmus et al. 2009). Employment (both obtaining and keeping it) is also frequently contingent on a consistent living situation, and individuals in substance abuse and mental health treatment programs often rely on stability in their residence community (Bradley et al. 2001).

Despite this documented importance of housing stability, individuals returning from prison, while known to be both a socially and economically vulnerable population (Petersilia 2003, Western 2006), face severe administrative and *de facto* barriers to the attainment of stable and secure housing. Landlords typically require potential tenants to disclose criminal history information and provide employment and housing references, which tend to disqualify ex-prisoners from the private housing market. Moreover, most individuals leave prison without enough money for a security deposit on an apartment (Travis et al. 2001). Ex-prisoners are generally also administratively excluded from the public housing system, as federal "one strike and you're out" policies permit housing authorities to deny admission to individuals with criminal histories, or to evict tenants who either become criminally involved themselves, or shelter a criminally-involved friend or relative in their home (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 1997).

These obstacles in securing housing are also well understood as a threat to successful re-entry. Several studies of ex-prisoners have found that those without a permanent residence upon release were more likely to abscond from parole, had more difficulty resisting drugs and finding jobs, and were more likely to be re-arrested (See Roman and Travis 2006 for a review). However, very little is known empirically about the extent to which incarceration compromises individuals' housing security upon their return. The studies that examine the housing situations of returning prisoners

tend to be based on extremely small convenience samples, and provide little context of how the instability that these individuals face compares to that faced by other vulnerable populations. Understanding these effects is of utmost importance, not only for the more than 600,000 people (mostly men) released from state and federal jurisdiction each year (Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics 2009), but for the families and communities to which they return.

In this analysis, we use a longitudinal survey of nearly 5,000 urban families to assess the effects of incarceration on men's housing security. Using a series of both cross-sectional and longitudinal regression models, we estimate the extent to which time in jail or prison increases their likelihood of homelessness or eviction, reduces their ability to pay their rent or mortgage, or causes them to "double-up" and move in with friends or relatives because of financial hardship. We anticipate that the administrative and financial barriers that formerly-incarcerated men face in the housing market have significant and substantial effects on their housing security upon release.

## **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, with a systematic oversample of unmarried parents. Given the high prevalence of fatherhood among incarcerated men, and the disadvantaged nature of the Fragile Families sample, the sample is generalizable to a population of men at substantial risk of incarceration. Moreover, the survey's examination of families rather than an exclusive focus on prisoners provides a counterfactual sample of men facing similar socioeconomic disadvantages, but who have not been to jail or prison. This comparison allows better isolation of the effects of incarceration from the confounding effects of other hardships.

The study surveys both men and their partners 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 examine family formation and child wellbeing, and contains detailed questions on the roles and circumstances of fathers and a variety of aspects of social and material disadvantage, including both housing insecurity and experience in the criminal justice system.

### *Housing Insecurity*

The Fragile Families survey provides several opportunities at each wave for fathers to indicate insecurity in their housing situation. At each follow-up wave they are asked their current living situation, and may indicate living in a shelter or other temporary housing, living with others but paying no rent, or that they are homeless. They are also asked about hardships in the year leading up to their surveys, and can indicate that they had been forced, due to financial constraints, to move in with family or friends, or that they had spent at least one night in a shelter, their car, an abandoned building, or another venue not intended for residence. They can also indicate if they were unable to pay their full rent or mortgage due to financial constraints, or if they were evicted from their home. We examine each of these hardships as a separate, but related dimension of housing insecurity.

## *Incarceration*

The Fragile Families survey provides several opportunities to identify fathers who have been incarcerated, either during the span of the survey or before the birth of their child. Both fathers and their partners are asked about his criminal history when the focal child is one, three, and five years old. In addition, several families identify paternal incarceration as having played a role in other aspects of their lives – as a reason for parent-child separation, relationship dissolution, or changes to child support or welfare arrangements. Because incarceration is frequently underreported, our principal measure considers a man to have a history of incarceration if any of these questions indicate that he has been in jail or prison. As expected given the disadvantaged nature of the Fragile Families sample, incarceration rates are high, with more than 40% of fathers having spent some time in jail or prison by the five-year survey wave.

## *Modeling Strategy*

Given the multiple ways in which survey respondents can report housing insecurity, and that these indicators do not each represent an equal form of hardship or instability, we estimate men's housing insecurity using a series of multilevel Rasch models (Raudenbush et al. 2003). These models, designed for binary response data, assume that each observed hardship item is located along a latent continuum of housing insecurity. Models nest each item response within survey respondents, and estimate the likelihood that a respondent will answer “yes” to each hardship question. Individual-specific and question-specific parameters represent the relative insecurity faced by each respondent, and the relative insecurity represented with each question.

We test the extent to which housing insecurity responses differ for men who have and have not been incarcerated by estimating separate models for men with and without histories of incarceration, and systematically comparing their coefficients. To guard against unobserved selection into both incarceration and housing insecurity, we control for a rich set of personal demographic, socioeconomic, and behavioral characteristics. To strengthen the causal inferences, we estimate models that focus on incarcerations occurring in the two most recent waves of the survey period (between the focal children's first and third, and third and fifth, birthdays), and control for housing hardships occurring before the periods of interest. In so doing, we estimate the extent to which housing insecurity changes following time spent in prison or jail.

We also test the extent to which housing instability associated with incarceration exceeds that associated with other life disruptions, such as relationship dissolution or the loss of a job. We estimate a second series of models in which men incarcerated during the span of the survey are compared to men facing these other disruptions, and compare the parameters associated with each. Finally, given the extensive “one-strike” regulations surrounding public housing projects, we estimate interacted models to test whether the effects of incarceration are more severe for men living in public housing before they are incarcerated.

## **Expected Findings**

Preliminary analyses suggest that men with histories of incarceration are indeed less secure in their living arrangements than those who have never been to prison or jail. This increased insecurity is robust to controls for individual background and pre-incarceration socioeconomic status, and we expect that our findings will also be robust to a focus on recent incarcerations, and controls for pre-incarceration living conditions. We anticipate that the Rasch models will suggest wide variation in the level of insecurity associated with each of the hardships noted in the Fragile Families survey. The majority of respondents do not experience any of these hardships, among those who do indicate hardship, some forms (such as paying partial rent or mortgage) are far more common than others (such as eviction or homelessness). We expect that incarceration increases instability across the hardship continuum. Finally, we anticipate that incarceration not only increases the overall instability that respondents face, but that the hardships experienced are stronger for formerly incarcerated men than even those facing other life disruptions, and strongest among men living in public housing projects before their incarceration. These findings would suggest aggravated hardship among the already vulnerable population of formerly incarcerated men, and that care must be taken to mitigate their risk of recidivism.