

Children of the Prison Boom **Mass **Incarceration** and the Future of American Inequality**



Sara Wakefield

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CHILDREN OF THE PRISON BOOM

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American Inequality*

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CHILDREN OF THE PRISON BOOM

For Riley

*For Carol, Cilla,
Greta, Jim and Silas*

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Muller 2012). Interested readers may want to consult these earlier works for more depth on each substantive topic as well as for additional statistical analyses. We are especially grateful to the reviewers, editors, and coauthors of those earlier works, as well as to the Oxford reviewers of the book, all of whom helped make the project what it is today.

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CHILDREN OF THE PRISON BOOM

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INTRODUCTION

MICHAEL AND NATHANIEL were born in the early 1990s to African American single mothers. At the time of their birth, each of their fathers was in prison. Their childhoods shared many other features. Both grew up in neighborhoods decimated by the crack epidemic and, as a result, witnessed violence and drug abuse in their youth. Both attended failing public schools with inadequate resources and high dropout rates. And for both, the majority of the children in their neighborhood went on to lead lives similar to those of their parents, in which addiction, single parenthood, and incarceration were all commonplace.

If their childhood circumstances look quite similar, their later outcomes could hardly differ more. Chaos has characterized Nathaniel's life. He was expelled from school, amassed a lengthy criminal record, and, at the age of fourteen, served time in a secure juvenile detention facility. Michael's life unfolded very differently. He graduated from high school and went on to receive a bachelor's degree and a master's degree from Stanford University. As an undergraduate, he also interned at the White House. And shortly after graduating, in 2012, at the age of twenty-two, Michael became the youngest elected council member in the city of Stockton, California. Nathaniel's aunt describes his life today as "over before it's begun."¹ Michael Tubbs's story received as much attention for his accomplishments at such a young age as for the disadvantages he overcame in order to achieve them.²

Both of these stories resonate with us, yet for different reasons. Nathaniel's story rings true because it is what we fear but can't help expecting: he has followed in his father's footsteps. Michael's story resonates with us for a different reason. We are drawn to Michael's

story because moving from one end of the socioeconomic ladder to the other is so difficult, even for those who possess abundant natural skills, talents, and luck. Indeed, his story represents not what we expect but what we hope for. We all grow up being told that if we set our mind to something, we can accomplish anything. Michael is the exception that proves the rule—the model of resilience and self-belief we are told to strive for.³

This book is about Nathaniel, Michael, and the millions of other children of the prison boom—children who at some point experienced the imprisonment of a parent, often a father, during the period since the 1970s when the incarceration rate grew six-fold. For a few children, the experience motivates them to do better in their own lives. For most, it leads to adverse consequences that ripple from infancy throughout childhood and even adulthood. Together, Michael and Nathaniel represent both the potential for resilience and the worst-case scenario for those millions of children. In this book, we consider the lives of these children to show that an outcome like Michael's is possible but that the outcomes for typical children of the prison boom look more like Nathaniel's.

This book is also about how mass imprisonment has transformed racial inequality among children, with implications for the future of inequality in America. We find that children like Nathaniel and Michael—African Americans born around 1990 whose fathers dropped out of high school—had a better than even chance of having a father imprisoned, at 50.5 percent. We also find very high cumulative risks of paternal imprisonment for all black children born in 1990. The risk of paternal imprisonment for all African American children is about 25 percent. These risks dwarf the risks for comparable white children, suggesting that mass parental imprisonment might have increased racial inequalities among children. In the following pages, we simultaneously tell a story about individual children who suffer as a result of the incarceration of a father, as well as one about how paternal incarceration affects the American inequality we all experience.

MACRO-LEVEL CHANGE AND CHILDHOOD INEQUALITY

Economic Shifts

Children experience all sorts of things as they grow up that influence their well-being, many of which have little to do with them and everything to do with their parents. Indeed, a central question for social scientists revolves around the influence of the shifting fortunes of parents on their children (Duncan, Featherman, and Duncan 1972). To take but one example that speaks to contemporary economic conditions, research suggests problematic, long-term consequences for the children of those laid off during the recent Great Recession. Spells of parental unemployment, especially those that last a long time, have consequences for children, including increased financial instability (Holzer 2010), parental stress (Jones 1988), and even an increased risk of homelessness (Lovell and Isaacs 2010).

Economic instability also can have effects at the aggregate level, meaning that they matter not just for children who personally experience the unemployment of a parent but also for other children growing up during the same uncertain times. A now classic study by sociologist Glen Elder describes the long-term consequences of the Great Depression for entire cohorts of American children (Elder 1974, 1999), demonstrating that shifts in the social circumstances of children—events like the Great Depression or the recent “Great Recession” that began in December 2007—may profoundly affect entire cohorts of children as they grow up.

The influence of parental circumstances on the lives of children is apparent not only in differences between birth cohorts but also in long-standing racial disparities in health, educational and occupational attainment, and well-being. For example, black and white children differ on a variety of measures of social adjustment, including school readiness and high school completion (McLeod

and Kaiser 2004), infant mortality (Wise 2003; Frisbie et al. 2004; Schempf et al. 2007), child homelessness (Staveteig and Wigton 2000), and teen pregnancy (Trent and Crowder 1997), all of which affect how they fare in adulthood. Social scientists have proposed a variety of explanations for these racial gaps, including differences in the risks of growing up poor, living in a poor neighborhood, and being raised by a single mom (Gortmaker and Wise 1997; McLeod and Nonnemaker 2000). None of these explanations fully explain racial disparity in these outcomes, however. We demonstrate that accounting for paternal imprisonment represents a significant advance in explaining the racial gaps in childhood well-being, and has implications not only for individual children, but also for inequality among them.

Paternal incarceration is particularly important today because, contrary to earlier periods in American history, millions of children now experience it. The influence of the prison in American life has grown greatly in the last four decades. Perhaps the best evidence of how widespread the experience of incarceration has become is found in the creation of a new Muppet in 2013 by the iconic children's show, *Sesame Street*. An online tool kit of resources for children of incarcerated parents accompanied the introduction of Alex, a Muppet with an incarcerated father.⁴ The United States today incarcerates a larger share of its population than at any point in its history, and more than any other country. This shift has had a vast impact on American children because prison and jail inmates are parents to an estimated 2.5 million minor children, a huge increase from the 500,000 children with incarcerated parents in 1980 (Pettit 2012: 84).

Parental Imprisonment

Our decision to focus on how mass imprisonment might explain the persistent racial gaps in child well-being is motivated by three observations. First, the increase in both the number of incarcerated adults and racial disparities in the risk of imprisonment mean