

# Incarceration and communities

**Todd Clear considers the impact of high rates of incarceration on crime prevalence in poor American neighbourhoods.**

Incarceration rates in the United States, at about 700 per 100,000, are the highest in the world, and by far the highest of any Western democratic state. Because incarceration is concentrated amongst certain groups, its effects are not spread evenly across that nation's citizens. In the US, African-Americans are over six times more likely to be incarcerated than European-descended Americans. More than one-fourth of African-Americans born this year can be expected to be sentenced to prison during their lifetimes. Imprisonment is also a phenomenon applied to younger males with limited economic prospects: typically 90 per cent of those behind bars are men, half have not finished high school and half are under the age of 35. These ethnic, gender and age concentrations of incarceration are well known and widely documented, but because housing is also segregated by some of these same factors, the result is a kind of spatial concentration of incarceration that has only recently received attention. It has been estimated that as many as one-fourth of the adult males in some US neighbourhoods are behind bars on any given day.

There are sound theoretical reasons to expect the ripple effects of high levels of incarceration to be both substantial and problematic. Incarceration affects social networks by removing one of the members of a (usually poor) family's network. When a loved one goes to prison, a social tie to those who remain behind is always threatened and often damaged. Those who remain behind can choose either to invest personal capital into maintaining that

tie, or they can learn how to live without the support that tie provided in their lives. Moreover, because social networks are also the foundation for informal social control, in communities where many people are removed for incarceration, informal social control is weakened.

## Studies of the impact of incarceration on community-level dynamics

There have been several qualitative and quantitative studies of the impact of high levels of incarceration on various community dynamics. (Citations for these studies may be found in Clear, 2007).

Recent ethnographies offer a qualitative look at the way incarceration affects community life. Braman (2004) spent two years studying families from poor, high incarceration areas of Washington, DC. He writes detailed descriptions of the way incarceration affects 12 families living there. From their stories, he documents the way incarceration breaks families apart, strains their economic resources, weakens parental involvement with children and leads to emotional and social isolation, and interferes with employment prospects for those who remain behind. These impacts have been found in other ethnographies in Tallahassee, Florida; Queens, New York; The Bronx, New York and Buffalo, New York State.

Several quantitative studies investigate the impact of incarceration on community-level dynamics:

- *Labour markets:* While during their initial period of release from

incarceration, both men and women are slightly more likely to be employed after imprisonment, these short-term effects rapidly wear off as the ex-prisoners' participation in the labour market diminishes over time. Being arrested has a short-term, negative impact on earnings and imprisonment has a permanent negative impact on earning potential. One estimate holds that increases in incarceration since 1980 have reduced young black male labour force activity by three–five per cent.

- *Parents, families and marriage:* Perhaps as many as 700,000 US families have a loved one behind bars on any given day. Incarceration is one of several dynamics that have removed black males from their neighbourhoods, producing a large ratio of adult women to men in places where female-headed, single-parent families are common. A county-level analysis for 1980 and 1990 found that both removals to and returns from prison increased the rate of female-headed households. Going to prison reduces the likelihood of being married, especially for black males over 23 years old, whose likelihood of getting married drops by 50 per cent following incarceration, and it cuts the rate of marriage within a year of the birth of a child by at least one-half. It is thus not surprising that people behind bars are four times more likely to be divorced than those who are free. A longitudinal study of poor, rural children in North Carolina found that having a parent get arrested leads to family break-up and family economic strain, both risk factors of later delinquency. Murray's (2005) review lists a dozen studies of the way incarceration of a male parent/spouse (or partner) affects the functioning of the family unit he left behind. The most prominent effect is the financial hardship, sometimes extreme, that results from the loss of income after the male partner's incarceration and from the costs of maintaining ties

with the person who has gone to prison.

- *Children*: Estimates of the number of children with a parent in prison run as high as 2.3 million, or almost 3 per cent of the under-eighteen population. About one-fifth of all US black children have a father with an incarceration history and that figure becomes 33 per cent when those fathers have not graduated from high school. A recent, systematic review of controlled studies of the way incarceration affects children (Murray and Farrington, 2008) describes a dozen studies showing that parental incarceration is a risk factor for later delinquency, and concludes that having a parent incarcerated makes the child between three and four times more likely to develop a record for juvenile delinquency.
- *Intimate (sexual) relations*: The incarceration of large numbers of parent-age males restricts the number of male partners available in the neighbourhood, putting women at a disadvantage in their search for intimate partners. Based on this dynamic, a Durham, North Carolina study found that incarceration rates in one year predicted later increases in rates of gonorrhea, syphilis and chlamydia among women (Thomas and Torrone, 2006). It also found that a doubling of incarceration rates increased the incidence of childbirth by teenage women by 71.61 births per 100,000 teenage women.
- *Attitudes towards authority and the state*: Three studies using different methods each suggest that high incarceration rates in impoverished neighbourhoods have contributed to various negative attitudes toward law, police and political institutions.

### Public safety

In the realm of public safety a strong theme has been non-linearity in effects. Dina Rose and I have argued that incarceration affects crime at the community level in two ways. First,

removal of young residents changes the capacity of social networks to resolve problems of people in the neighbourhood, weakens attachment to the neighbourhood and ties to neighbours and disrupts home lives of families in ways that lead to delinquency. The second effect occurs in re-entry. Poor communities that absorb large numbers of people returning from prison have higher crime, not just because these people commit the crimes, but also because they are needy residents who tie up the limited interpersonal and social resources of their families and networks, weakening their ability to perform other functions of informal social control.

When we modeled the impact of incarceration rates on crime rates in Tallahassee neighbourhoods, controlling for neighbourhood-level measures of social disorganisation (concentrated disadvantage) re-entry and violent crime, we found two different impacts of neighbourhoods' incarceration experiences on their rates of crime. One is linear: the number of people returning to prison has a direct and positive impact on crime. The second effect is curvilinear, 'that increasing admissions to prison in one year has a negligible effect on crime at low levels, a negative effect on crime the following year when the rate is relatively low, but, after a certain concentration of residents is removed from the community through incarceration, the effect of additional admissions is to increase, not decrease, crime' (Clear et al., 2003: 55). This result has been replicated in a second Tallahassee study covering a longer span of years (1994–2002).

### Conclusion

An argument can be made that the exact nature of the impact of mass incarceration on impoverished communities has yet to be fully documented. Controversial findings still exist for the impact on crime of high rates of incarceration in poor places. The implications of incarceration for other community dynamics, such as health,

families, children and the local job market, are clearer, and there is strong evidence that they are overwhelmingly negative. Since these impacts weaken sources of community stability, the studies showing that high incarceration rates are a foundation for crime are more plausible than those suggesting a more benign outcome. Thus, it seems that high rates of incarceration cycle back onto the community and themselves become problems for public safety. ■

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