

Parental Incarceration and the Transformation of American Adulthood

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ABSTRACT

A burgeoning literature considers the collateral consequences of parental incarceration, a stressor experienced by a growing and unequally distributed number of children, for the wellbeing of children and adolescents. But this literature almost exclusively overlooks how incarceration affects an additional important life course stage, the transition to adulthood. In this manuscript, we use data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (N = 9,320) to explore how both paternal and maternal incarceration are associated with objective and subjective transitions to adulthood. We find that paternal incarceration accelerates the transition to adulthood but that, by and large, the association between maternal incarceration and an accelerated transition to adulthood results from social selection forces. There is some evidence that paternal incarceration is most consequential when it occurs early in the life course. Taken together, results suggest that mass incarceration may transform the transition to adulthood in the United States.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The transition from adolescence to adulthood, a fundamental stage in the life course, has undergone dramatic change in the second half of the 20th century in the United States. The transition to adulthood was once a standardized process—finish school, get a job, move out of parent’s home, get married and have children—that most individuals experienced within a fairly narrow age range (Fussell and Furstenberg 2005). But today, in part because of demographic changes in family life and the increased importance of higher education, the transition to adulthood has increased in variability and lengthened in time (Furstenberg 2010; Fussell and Furstenberg 2003; Settersten and Ray 2010a; Shanahan 2000). The variability in the transition to adulthood is particularly pronounced among children from disadvantaged social class backgrounds, as these individuals often lack family and institutional supports that allow for a lengthened transition to adulthood (Furstenberg 2008; Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, and Ruth 2005). Given that accelerated transitions to adulthood are associated with a range of deleterious outcomes across the life course—including reduced economic wellbeing and poor health—the transition to adulthood period is a powerful source of intra- and intergenerational inequality (Setterstein and Ray 2010b).

One demographic change that might contribute to inequality during the transition to adulthood is the rapid and dramatic rise in mass incarceration. More than 2.3 million individuals, the majority of whom are poorly educated minority men, are currently incarcerated in prisons or jails. Ten million individuals, many of whom are still under correctional supervision, are released back to their families and communities annually (Glaze 2011; McLean and Thompson 2007). The majority of these marginalized individuals have children (Mumola 2000) and, in accordance with the life course perspective documenting the interconnectedness of parents and children (Elder, Johnson, and Crosnoe 2003), a burgeoning literature documents the collateral consequences of parental incarceration for children (Cho 2009a, 2009b; Geller, Cooper, Garfinkel, Schwartz-Soicher, and

Mincy, 2012; Murray and Farrington 2008; Murray, Loeber, and Pardini 2012; Turney and Wildeman forthcoming; Wakefield and Wildeman forthcoming; Wildeman 2010; Wildeman, Wakefield, and Turney 2013). Neglected from this literature, however, is an understanding of how parental incarceration may lead to outcomes during the transition to adulthood. Parental incarceration is a stressor to the family system. Incarceration reduces family income (Schwartz-Soicher, Geller, and Garfinkel 2011; Western 2006), disrupts parental relationships (Geller 2013; Massoglia, Remster, and King 2011), and impedes mental health among the incarcerated and their romantic partners (Schnittker, Massoglia, and Uggen 2012; Turney, Wildeman, and Schnittker 2012; Wildeman, Schnittker, and Turney 2012), all of which may accelerate adolescents' transition to adulthood.

In this manuscript, we provide the first systematic examination of how parental incarceration affects their children's transitions to adulthood with data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), a nationally representative, longitudinal survey of more than 20,000 youths who were in grades 7 through 12 during the 1994-1995 school year. These individuals have been subsequently re-interviewed three times: in 1996, when they were in grades 8 through 12 (wave 2); in 2001-2002, when they were aged 18 to 26 (wave 3); and in 2007-2008, when they were aged 24 to 32 (wave 4). These data provide a unique opportunity to examine the relationship between parental incarceration and children's transitions to adulthood. They include a relatively large number of respondents who experience maternal or paternal incarceration, as well as information about the timing and chronicity of incarceration. They also include both objective and subjective transition to adulthood outcomes. Finally, they include a wide array of individual and family characteristics, which allow us to control for factors that may render the relationship between parental incarceration and the transition to adulthood spurious.

After presenting descriptive statistics (Tables 1 and 2), the multivariate analyses proceed in three stages. In the first analytic stage (Tables 3 through 5), we use logistic and negative binomial

regression models to document how both paternal and maternal incarceration in childhood and adolescence (ages 0 to 17) are associated with five objective measures of the transition to adulthood (measured when respondents are ages 18 to 26)—not being enrolled in school, full-time employment, living in one’s own place, marriage, and childbearing—as well as a summary measure indicating how many transitions they experienced. In addition to estimating the average association between paternal incarceration and these transition to adulthood outcomes, we also consider how the timing of parental incarceration (mutually exclusive dummy variables: no incarceration [reference category], parental incarceration between ages 0 to 6, incarceration between ages 7 to 12, and incarceration between ages 13 to 17) and the chronicity of parental incarceration (mutually exclusive dummy variables: no incarceration [reference category], one incarceration, and two or more incarcerations) is associated with these outcomes. In the second analytic stage (Tables 6 through 8), we use ordered logistic regression models to document how paternal and maternal incarceration (ever, timing, and chronicity) are associated with two measures of subjective adulthood (perceived age (based on the question “How old do you feel compared to others your age?”) and adult status (based on the question “How often do you think of yourself as an adult?”)). In the third and final analytic stage (results not presented), we consider how these associations vary by race/ethnicity, gender, and family structure.

Table 2 documents that, for nearly all of the outcomes considered, children who experience paternal and maternal incarceration, compared to their counterparts who do not, are more likely to experience the transition to adulthood. We turn next to Table 3, which documents the multivariate association between parental incarceration and the objective transition to adulthood measures. In the final model, which adjusts for a wide array of individual- and family-level characteristics, paternal incarceration is associated with making a larger number of adult transitions. But the association between maternal incarceration and the number of adult transitions falls from statistical significance

in this final model, suggesting that observed differences result from social selection forces. Additionally, focusing on the individual measures, paternal incarceration is associated with a greater odds of not being enrolled in school and having a live birth. Results from Table 4 shows that the consequences of incarceration are concentrated among children who first experienced paternal incarceration between ages 7 and 12 and among children who first experienced maternal incarceration between ages 0 and 6, and results from Table 5 show that children who experience only one incarceration experience, compared to those who experience two or more incarceration experiences, are similarly disadvantaged. Finally, in Tables 6 through 8, we show that paternal incarceration is associated with greater perceived age and adult status, especially when it occurs early in childhood (ages 0 to 6) or in adolescence (ages 13 to 17). There is also evidence that maternal incarceration, when it occurs in adolescence, is positively associated with subjective adulthood, and that both one-time and chronic paternal incarceration are positively associated with subjective adulthood.

Taken together, these findings suggest that parental incarceration, especially paternal incarceration, is heavily consequential for children's life course trajectories. Incarceration, which has become a normative life course stage for some groups of the population, more common than employment or marriage (Western and Pettit 2010), affects not only the life course of the incarcerated but the life course of the children of the incarcerated. This project contributes to the burgeoning literature on the collateral consequences of parental incarceration for children and to the literature on inequalities in the transition to adulthood.

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Table 1. Unweighted Descriptive Statistics of Variables in Analysis.

	Mean or %	(S.D.)
<i>Transition to adulthood outcomes</i>		
Number of adult transitions (range: 0 to 5)	1.887	(1.345)
Not enrolled in education	59.2%	
Full-time employment	47.1%	
Lives on own	46.6%	
Ever married	17.2%	
Has a child	18.6%	
<i>Subjective adulthood outcomes</i>		
Perceived age		
Younger	6.1%	
Neither older nor younger	35.4%	
Older	58.5%	
Adult status		
Never	2.0%	
Seldom	7.6%	
Sometimes	17.5%	
Most of the time	32.7%	
All of the time	40.2%	
<i>Explanatory variables</i>		
Paternal incarceration timing		
Never	86.3%	
Between ages 0 and 6	5.1%	
Between ages 7 and 12	3.5%	
Between ages 13 and 17	1.6%	
Before birth or after age 17	3.4%	
Paternal incarceration chronicity		
Never	86.9%	
Once	6.9%	
Twice or more	6.5%	
Maternal incarceration timing		
Never	96.9%	
Between ages 0 and 6	0.6%	
Between ages 7 and 12	0.9%	
Between ages 13 and 17	0.6%	
Before birth or after age 17	1.0%	
Maternal incarceration chronicity		
Never	97.0%	
Once	1.7%	
Twice or more	1.3%	
<i>Controls</i>		
Respondent race		
Non-Hispanic White	54.7%	
Non-Hispanic Black	19.8%	
Hispanic	15.4%	
Non-Hispanic other race	10.1%	
Respondent age	22.120	(1.606)
Respondent female	54.7%	
Respondent native-born	93.0%	
Respondent number of siblings	1.508	(1.180)
Respondent reports verbal/physical/sexual abuse prior to age 12	24.0%	
Respondent quite or extremely close to biological father	64.0%	

Respondent reports drugs available at home	3.0%	
Respondent delinquency (range: 0 to 3)	0.282	(0.345)
Respondent exposure to violence (range: 0 to 2)	0.095	(0.223)
Mother age	41.492	(6.406)
Parent educational attainment		
Less than high school	12.4%	
High school diploma or GED	29.1%	
Some college	21.1%	
College degree or higher	37.4%	
Parent household income (log)	3.543	(0.842)
Parent has enough money to pay bills	81.6%	
Mother or father receives public assistance	10.3%	
Parent married	72.4%	
Parent drinks at least three to five days a week	4.1%	
Parent reports drugs a big problem in neighborhood	8.3%	
N		9,320

Note: Descriptive statistics derived from the first multiply imputed data set.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of All Dependent Variables, by Parental Incarceration.

	Paternal incarceration		Maternal incarceration	
	Never Mean or %	Ages 0 to 17 Mean or %	Never Mean or %	Ages 0 to 17 Mean or %
<i>Transition to adulthood outcomes</i>				
Number of adult transitions	1.834 (1.343)	2.132 (1.310)	1.874 (1.347)	2.302 (1.149)
Not enrolled in education	57.2%	72.2%	58.8%	72.9%
Full-time employment	46.8%	47.8%	47.0%	49.5%
Lives on own	45.7%	52.8%	46.3%	57.8%
Ever married	16.7%	19.7%	17.1%	19.3%
Has a child	17.3%	28.7%	18.2%	30.7%
<i>Subjective adulthood outcomes</i>				
Perceived age				
Younger	6.3%	4.7%	6.2%	5.2%
Neither older nor younger	36.8%	27.5%	35.8%	22.4%
Older	56.9%	67.8%	58.1%	72.4%
Adult status				
Never	2.0%	1.6%	2.0%	0.5%
Seldom	7.7%	6.6%	7.5%	4.7%
Sometimes	18.4%	11.8%	17.7%	9.9%
Most of the time	33.3%	28.7%	33.0%	24.5%
All of the time	38.5%	51.3%	39.7%	60.4%
N	8,045	957	9,032	195

Note: Descriptive statistics derived from the first multiply imputed data set. Respondents with parents incarcerated before their birth or after age 18 are omitted from the table. Asterisks indicate statistically significant differences between respondents who did and did not experience father incarceration and between respondents who did and did not experience mother incarceration. ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tests).

Table 3. Estimating Transition to Adulthood Outcomes as a Function of Parental Incarceration (N = 9,320).

	Paternal incarceration			Maternal incarceration		
	Model 1 <i>unadjusted</i>	Model 2 <i>+ basic controls</i>	Model 3 <i>+ all controls</i>	Model 1 <i>unadjusted</i>	Model 2 <i>+ basic controls</i>	Model 3 <i>+ all controls</i>
Number of adult transitions	0.192 *** (0.027)	0.125 *** (0.023)	0.072 ** (0.022)	0.168 ** (0.054)	0.127 * (0.058)	0.057 (0.054)
Not currently enrolled in school	0.708 *** (0.098)	0.449 *** (0.102)	0.262 * (0.112)	0.880 *** (0.223)	0.721 ** (0.269)	0.519 + (0.312)
Works full-time	-0.003 (0.094)	-0.039 (0.098)	-0.037 (0.101)	0.162 (0.226)	0.228 (0.256)	0.221 (0.253)
Lives in own home	0.233 * (0.110)	0.285 * (0.115)	0.172 (0.118)	0.069 (0.172)	0.219 (0.190)	0.061 (0.186)
Ever married	0.250 + (0.132)	0.169 (0.137)	0.083 (0.370)	0.098 (0.273)	0.116 (0.297)	-0.041 (0.288)
Had live birth	0.792 *** (0.091)	0.547 *** (0.106)	0.337 ** (0.106)	0.509 * (0.219)	0.198 (0.220)	-0.076 (0.207)

Note: All outcomes are estimated with logistic regression models, with one exception. The number of adult transitions is estimated with a negative binomial model. Coefficients for paternal and maternal incarceration (between ages 0 and 17, compared to never) are shown. Standard deviations are in parentheses. All models account for Add Health's stratified sampling design, including the Wave 4 longitudinal weights (*gswgt4*). All models include parental incarceration. Model 2 adjusts for the following, all of which are exogenous to parental incarceration: respondent race, respondent age, respondent gender, respondent nativity, mother age, and parent educational attainment. Model 3 adjusts for the following, some of which may be endogenous to parental incarceration: respondent number of siblings, respondent reports verbal/physical/sexual abuse prior to age 12, respondent quite or extremely close to biological father, respondent reports drugs available at home, respondent delinquency, respondent exposure to violence, parent household income (log), parent has enough money to pay bills, mother or father receives public assistance, parent married, parent drinks at least three to five days a week, parent reports drug are a big problem in neighborhood. + $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tests).

Table 4. Negative Binomial Regression Models Estimating Number of Adult Transitions as a Function of Parental Incarceration Timing (N = 9,320).

	Number of adult transitions		
	Model 1 <i>unadjusted</i>	Model 2 <i>+ basic controls</i>	Model 3 <i>+ all controls</i>
Paternal incarceration (reference = never)			
Between ages 0 and 6	0.164 *** (0.044)	0.100 * (0.038)	0.040 (0.039)
Between ages 7 and 12	0.207 *** (0.044)	0.158 *** (0.041)	0.112 ** (0.039)
Between ages 13 and 17	0.176 ** (0.066)	0.088 (0.053)	0.041 (0.053)
Maternal incarceration (reference = never)			
Between ages 0 and 6	0.199 + (0.105)	0.284 ** (0.094)	0.193 * (0.086)
Between ages 7 and 12	0.214 ** (0.071)	0.153 + (0.079)	0.095 (0.076)
Between ages 13 and 17	0.063 (0.127)	-0.066 (0.114)	-0.132 (0.104)

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses. All models account for Add Health's stratified sampling design, including the Wave 4 longitudinal weights (gswgt4). Models correspond with those presented in Table 3. + $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tests).

Table 5. Negative Binomial Regression Models Estimating Number of Adult Transitions as a Function of Parental Incarceration Chronicity (N = 9,320).

	Number of adult transitions		
	Model 1 <i>unadjusted</i>	Model 2 <i>+ basic controls</i>	Model 3 <i>+ all controls</i>
Paternal incarceration (reference = never)			
Once	0.142 ** (0.040)	0.066 + (0.035)	0.028 (0.035)
Twice or more	0.194 *** (0.041)	0.123 ** (0.041)	0.069 (0.042)
Maternal incarceration (reference = never)			
Once	0.197 ** (0.053)	0.117 + (0.063)	0.072 (0.059)
Twice or more	0.258 ** (0.073)	0.182 * (0.078)	0.113 (0.078)

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses. All models account for Add Health's stratified sampling design, including the Wave 4 longitudinal weights (gswgt4). Models correspond with those presented in Table 3. + $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tests).

Table 6. Ordered Logistic Regression Models Estimating Subjective Adulthood as a Function of Parental Incarceration (N = 9,320).

	Perceived age				Adult status			
	Model 1 <i>unadjusted</i>	Model 2 <i>+ basic controls</i>	Model 3 <i>+ all controls</i>	Model 4 <i>+ mechanisms</i>	Model 1 <i>unadjusted</i>	Model 2 <i>+ basic controls</i>	Model 3 <i>+ all controls</i>	Model 4 <i>+ mechanisms</i>
Paternal incarceration	0.538 *** (0.092)	0.467 *** (.094)	0.303 ** (0.091)	0.269 ** (0.093)	0.447 *** (0.113)	0.267 * (0.118)	0.194 (0.122)	0.160 (0.124)
Maternal incarceration	0.616 * (0.237)	0.540 * (0.239)	0.312 (0.242)	0.303 (0.252)	0.691 *** (0.186)	0.498 * (0.192)	0.386 + (0.197)	0.379 + (0.191)

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses. All models account for Add Health’s stratified sampling design, including the Wave 4 longitudinal weights (gswgt4). Models 1 through 3 correspond with Models 1 through 3 in Table 3. Model 4 adjusts for all covariates in Model 3 and the following mechanisms: not enrolled in education, full-time employment, lives on own, ever married, has a child. + $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tests).

Table 7. Ordered Logistic Regression Models Estimating Subjective Adulthood as a Function of Parental Incarceration Timing (N = 9,320).

	Perceived age			Adult status		
	Model 1 <i>unadjusted</i>	Model 2 <i>+ basic controls</i>	Model 3 <i>+ all controls</i>	Model 1 <i>unadjusted</i>	Model 2 <i>+ basic controls</i>	Model 3 <i>+ all controls</i>
Paternal incarceration (reference = never)						
Between ages 0 and 6	0.614 *** (0.142)	0.538 *** (0.146)	0.356 * (0.143)	0.637 *** (0.131)	0.469 ** (0.139)	0.384 ** (0.139)
Between ages 7 and 12	0.225 (0.168)	0.153 (0.173)	0.008 (0.173)	0.387 * (0.163)	0.206 (0.169)	0.178 (0.175)
Between ages 13 and 17	0.919 *** (0.221)	0.878 *** (0.223)	0.752 ** (0.216)	0.201 (0.317)	0.012 (0.329)	-0.081 (0.334)
Maternal incarceration (reference = never)						
Between ages 0 and 6	-0.078 (0.410)	-0.159 (0.410)	-0.426 (0.409)	0.187 (0.373)	0.080 (0.359)	-0.056 (0.357)
Between ages 7 and 12	0.748 + (0.391)	0.708 + (0.387)	0.470 (0.400)	0.917 *** (.2860)	0.696 * (0.309)	0.579 + (0.310)
Between ages 13 and 17	1.397 ** (0.436)	1.278 ** (0.442)	1.096 * (0.433)	0.976 * (0.405)	0.748 + (0.401)	0.674 (0.406)

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses. All models account for Add Health's stratified sampling design, including the Wave 4 longitudinal weights (gswgt4). Models 1 through 3 correspond with Models 1 through 3 in Table 3. + $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tests).

Table 8. Ordered Logistic Regression Models Estimating Subjective Adulthood as a Function of Parental Incarceration Chronicity (N = 9,320).

	Perceived age			Adult status		
	Model 1 <i>unadjusted</i>	Model 2 <i>+ basic controls</i>	Model 3 <i>+ all controls</i>	Model 1 <i>unadjusted</i>	Model 2 <i>+ basic controls</i>	Model 3 <i>+ all controls</i>
Paternal incarceration (reference = never)						
Once	0.447 *** (0.116)	0.405 ** (0.118)	0.294 * (0.118)	0.242 (0.236)	0.188 (0.232)	0.040 (0.237)
Twice or more	0.539 *** (0.123)	0.476 *** (0.125)	0.295 * (0.132)	0.689 ** (0.245)	0.611 * (0.247)	0.373 (0.252)
Maternal incarceration (reference = never)						
Once	0.382 *** (0.102)	0.244 * (0.107)	0.204 + (0.111)	0.369 + (0.211)	0.152 (0.221)	0.066 (0.224)
Twice or more	0.535 *** (0.134)	0.361 * (0.138)	0.295 * (0.144)	0.792 ** (0.253)	0.595 * (0.283)	0.472 + (0.239)

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses. All models account for Add Health's stratified sampling design, including the Wave 4 longitudinal weights (gswgt4). Models 1 through 3 correspond with Models 1 through 3 in Table 3. + $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tests).