The consequences of incarceration
Challenges for scientifically informed and policy-relevant research

Michael Massoglia
Cody Warner
Pennsylvania State University

The size of the penal system has grown so rapidly it now merits consideration alongside other key societal institutions. Consider that each year approximately as many men get out of prison as graduate college (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004), and that the number of people incarcerated (Glaze, 2010: 2) is roughly equivalent to the enrollment of all institutions that are classified as having high research activity (Snyder and Dillow, 2010: 326). Given this rapid and continued expansion of the “felon class” (Uggen, Manza, and Thompson, 2006), research on the consequences of incarceration is increasingly becoming a staple of sociological and criminological work, with a particular emphasis on the stratifying impact of the penal system. For instance, in the last 10 years, work has examined the impact of the penal system on a range of outcomes including wages (Western, 2002), health (Schnittker and John, 2007), infectious disease (Massoglia, 2008), childhood poverty (Wildeman, 2009), and political outcomes (Manza and Uggen, 2006).

Wakefield and Wildeman (2011, this issue) make an important contribution to this literature. They find that children with an incarcerated father have higher levels of internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Furthermore, they suggest that racial disparities in childhood behavioral problems are noticeably larger because of the huge risk of parental imprisonment for Black children. Two notable aspects are found in this research. First, it demonstrates the intergenerational effects of incarceration. In doing so, the authors advance research beyond the typical focus on offenders and their partners. Second, the authors
suggest that the effects of incarceration might be so widespread and pervasive that they partially explain racial disparities in childhood well-being. The study design is convincing, and the findings are both powerful and important.

In reflecting on policy implications that flow from Wakefield and Wildeman’s (2011) work, we first acknowledge the challenges inherent in conducting research and, by extension, the difficulties in making policy recommendations for current and former offenders. It goes without saying that incarceration is highly selective and serves a disadvantaged population. This concept extends beyond the individuals incarcerated, as Wakefield and Wildeman note that children of incarcerated parents “were not doing well prior to the imprisonment of their father, and they are worse off as a result of it.” Programs that benefit a general population might have no effect on the inmate population. Thus, it is important to derive policy recommendations from methodologically rigorous and theoretically informed studies. The work of Wakefield and Wildeman is precisely this type of research. Yet science is incremental, and even such an excellent study allows for a consideration of how research can best inform public policy.

We organize our review as follows. First, we use the Wakefield and Wildeman (2011) article as a lens to consider issues we perceive as important to inform policy on the consequences of incarceration. In our view, the foundation for informed policy recommendations is rigorous scientific research, and we focus on the following general areas: (a) the substantive differences between jails and prisons, (b) appropriate comparison groups, and (c) potential scope limitations of research on the consequences of incarceration. We then discuss more specific policy recommendations and highlight what we see as gaps in the literature where future research is needed to inform correctional policies.

**Measurement of the Independent Variable**

In our view, analytic and conceptual clarity on the type of institutionalization under consideration is critical to making well-informed policy recommendations. Wakefield and Wildeman’s (2011) analyses serve as a relevant example, as they treat a term of imprisonment as analogous to a jail spell. Although this approach is not entirely unique (see, e.g., Apel and Sweeten, 2010), treating jails as identical to prisons is likely problematic. Wakefield and Wildeman are sensitive to this issue, noting that the research designs of their data sets do not allow for a separation of parental incarceration in prisons versus jails, and they suggest that not making this distinction could be introducing bias into their models. Our point is not to preference work that examines incarceration in prisons over that which examines incarceration in jails. Rather, we are suggesting that prisons and jails are different social institutions, and by extension, the life-course implications of these two processes are likely different. As such, to inform public policy, a clear delineation between research focusing on prisons and jails is likely important.

Consider that, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, in 2008, the average prison stay was approximately 2 years, and slightly more than 3.5 years for violent offenders
Massoglia and Warner (West, Sabol, and Greenman, 2010). Jail stays, however, are much shorter. On average, local jails have a weekly population turnover rate of more than 60% (Minton, 2010), and many individuals spend only a single night in jail. The differences extend beyond simply length of detainment; in many cases, individuals in jails have not been convicted of a felony. Furthermore, in 2009, 6 in 10 jail detainees were awaiting court action on a current charge (Minton, 2010). As such, many of the legally sanctioned and well-known “collateral” consequences that accompany a felony conviction are not applicable to those housed in jails. These consequences include restrictions on educational loans, federally subsidized housing, employment opportunities, and voting.

Aside from these important legal differences, other more nuanced considerations are also relevant. Although jails are located in virtually every county in the country, prisons often take individuals far away from their family and friends. Inmates disproportionately come from poor urban areas (Lynch and Sabol, 2004), but prisons are typically located in rural areas (King, Mauer, and Huling, 2004). When coupled with increased sentence lengths, such distances likely contribute to the difficulty inmates have maintaining stable family relationships (Lepoo and Western, 2005). This effect extends to communities as well, as up to 25% of the adult population is incarcerated in some areas (Lynch and Sabol, 2004). One could convincingly argue the stigma of a prison sentence is—on average—longer and more severe than that associated with detainment in a local jail. The totality of these circumstances suggests that prisons and jails are different in important ways, and they likely have different life-course consequences.

Before proceeding, a point of clarification is needed. We understand that some individuals housed in jails were convicted of felonies and that many individuals convicted of felonies do not end up sentenced to prison. Partly stemming from prison overcrowding, approximately 5% of federal and state prisoners are housed in local jails (West et al., 2010). Moreover, we also understand that considerable variation exists in the incarceration experience. Prisons differ in terms of institutional resources, housing capacity, security, and population housed. That said, a fair view of the correctional landscape suggests that our general point—that, relative to jails, prisons represent a different, and much more invasive, form of social control—seems a fair characterization of the institutional reality. Prisons and jails play fundamentally different roles in the criminal justice system. When attempting to understand the individual-level life-course consequences of incarceration, we believe that variation within prison pales in comparison with the variation between prisons and jails.

As such, analyses that treat jail spells as analogous to prisons confound the lasting impact of both institutions and are not optimally positioned to make policy recommendations. Consider the classic study on wage inequality by Western (2002). Recent work—with a younger sample—found the impact of incarceration less consequential (Apel and Sweeten, 2010). As such, these two articles could lead to divergent policy recommendations. However, strong evidence suggests that the measure of institutionalization used by Apel and Sweeten (2010: 457) predominately captures jail spells—the median length of confinement is
2 months—rather than prison spells. Thus, it is difficult to ascertain whether the inconsistent findings across the two studies reflect actual differences or stem from a function of measurement. As such, it seems that we should exercise caution when drawing conclusions based on direct comparisons between these two studies.

The Appropriate Comparison Group

The two studies discussed in the previous section, in addition to highlighting the importance of measurement, also speak to what we believe is a second important issue in research on the consequences of incarceration—who is the appropriate comparison group? This question is at the core of causal inference in social science research and is fundamentally important to inform public policy. At the onset, we again acknowledge the challenges presented by the scarcity of available data to speak to this issue, and we remain aware of this limitation throughout our discussion. Moreover, some of the most powerful research designs, such as random assignment, are obviously impractical for understanding the consequences of incarceration (but see Chiricos, Barrick, Bales, and Bontrager, 2007, for an exception). That said, finding the appropriate comparison group is of paramount importance for making scientifically informed policy recommendations. Absent a suitable reference group, any policy recommendations could be guided by findings that do not represent the true effect of incarceration.

In our view, the best research designs use inmates and ex-inmates as their own comparison group (see Schnittker and John, 2007; Western, 2002). Such designs compare inmates on a given dimension—functioning health (Schnittker and John, 2007) or wages (Western, 2002)—before and after a spell of incarceration. Any postconfinement differences can then be attributed to the incarceration experience. Because each individual acts as his or her own control, individual-level attributes that remain stable over time do not impact the parameter estimates. These individual-level attributes (for instance, criminal propensity or work ethic) are remarkably difficult to measure, and differences in these factors across persons can, and often do, bias parameter estimates. By accounting for these processes across persons, methods that focus on within-person change are well positioned to inform policy. Of course, the data requirements necessary for this approach can be daunting, to say the least. Although time-stable characteristics cannot bias the models, researchers need repeated measures of all relevant time-varying processes, including incarceration status. Such data requirements make widespread use of these models difficult. As such, we feel it is important to consider how other research designs can be used to capture a comparison group.

One such promising design involves comparing inmates with individuals convicted of a similar offense, but who are sentenced to probation rather than incarceration (Apel and Sweeten, 2010). Such an approach has the advantage of being able to account for a criminal conviction and make the comparison group as homogenous as possible, at least as it relates to correctional convictions. Researchers taking this approach, however, need to be sensitive to preexisting homogeneity within the probation group. Much goes into
the decision to incarcerate, and particular individuals convicted of similar crimes might have dramatically different backgrounds and different needs. Studies taking this approach would need to ensure that these preexisting differences are taken into account before making specific policy recommendations.

Researchers also can use statistical controls to account for differences between those who were incarcerated and those who were not. One well-known example in the social sciences is the use of regression models or covariate adjustment. Despite the widespread use of regression techniques, policy recommendations derived from these approaches should be conservative and made with appropriate caution. A particular concern is the inability to definitively rule out bias due to unobservable variables. As such, although regression models can and do inform policy, recommendations should be mindful of the well-known limitations of these models.

A second approach has been driven largely by statistical advances in the social sciences and uses statistical procedures to make a control group similar to those who were incarcerated, often referred to as matching or propensity score modeling (see, e.g., Massoglia, 2008, or Appendix B of the Wakefield and Wildeman, 2011, study). This approach offers several advantages over traditional regression models and, in particular, has an explicit emphasis on creating a comparable control group with which to make comparisons with the inmate sample. That said, these models typically require large samples and are heavily dependent on the quality of the data. Additionally, these models are not immune from bias because of omitted variables. Indeed, this issue can be particularly problematic when unmeasured processes are predictive of placement in the treatment status, which in this case is incarceration. Unless researchers are confident that they can adequately model the processes that lead to incarceration, policy recommendations could be misinformed.

The Scope of the Prison Boom

Perhaps now is a good time to revisit the work of Wakefield and Wildeman (2011). When assessing policy recommendations, two issues emerge. First, stemming from the sampling design, it is not clear whether the recommendations would benefit those who were housed in jails or those who spent time in prisons. Although it is possible, and in some cases likely, that a specific recommendation could benefit both groups, in an era of economic scarcity, little public or political tolerance exists for nonfocused policy initiatives. Second, short of advocating for a decrease in the use of incarceration, it is challenging from Wakefield and Wildeman's work to identify precisely what group(s) a given policy initiative is best directed toward.

Yet, what is clear from this study, and research on the consequences of incarceration more generally, is the need to think more broadly about the role of incarceration as an institution of stratification. This view challenges us to consider the social experiences of inmates and to look for comparable reference groups in other aspects of life. For instance, a forthcoming article on family instability examines the parallels between the detrimental impact of time spent separated from family for both soldiers and inmates.
Both inmates and soldiers spend considerable time separated from their families; yet inmates are stigmatized, whereas soldiers are not. Thus, by comparing these two groups, the authors gain the necessary leverage to examine whether stigma or separation is most consequential for understanding the mechanism that leads to high rates of divorce among incarcerated individuals. Examining individuals housed in other institutional settings—for instance, long-term care or mental health facilities—also might help us make clearer and more focused policy recommendations regarding incarceration.

Although these institutional comparisons can be helpful, policy-informed research must establish clear links between incarceration and social outcomes to derive conclusions strongly supported by the data. As research on the consequences of incarceration has expanded, so too has the scope of inquiry. Although many studies still focus directly on inmates and their partners, in recent years, incarceration has been related to childhood outcomes (Geller, Garfinkel, Cooper, and Mincy, 2009; Murray and Farrington, 2008; Wakefield and Uggen, 2010; Western and Wildeman, 2009; Wildeman and Western, 2010), community-level outcomes (Clear, 2007; Clear, Rose, and Ryder 2001; Hipp and Yates, 2009), and in the Wakefield and Wildeman (2011) article, racial disparities in childhood well-being. It is imperative that any policy initiatives stemming from this line of research clearly specify the processes linking incarceration to life-course outcomes. For instance, although Wakefield and Wildeman identify a relationship between incarceration and childhood outcomes, it is not clear whether this effect is a function of something unique to the incarceration experience, a result of having a parent absent from the household or perhaps even adjustment problems caused when the parent returns home. Differences between these mechanisms can lead to dramatically different policy recommendations.

Similarly, linking large societal phenomena, as Wakefield and Wildeman (2011) do, to incarceration rates raises fundamental questions about the reach of incarceration. Absent a remarkably strong methodological design, such research faces challenges in making causal claims because other factors might—at least in part—drive the findings. Although existing work has shown that the penal state has had large and sweeping impacts on American society, research needs to take caution to specify the impact of incarceration without overreaching to other widespread social changes, such as deindustrialization and widespread economic restructuring, that occurred during this time period but are not causally related to the expansion of the penal state. That said, Wakefield and Wildeman’s analyses represent, in our assessment, one of the best attempts at linking incarceration to broad social outcomes.

In the end, focused and effective policy recommendations must flow from scientifically informed and methodologically rigorous research. Although we have used Wakefield and Wildeman’s (2011) article as a lens to discuss some larger issues that we feel limit the policy relevance of some research, it is also clear that they make a significant contribution to the field. We now use the insights from their piece to note where well-informed policy recommendations could have the greatest potential impact, while focusing on areas where additional research is needed to inform public policy.
Policy Implications of the Consequences of Incarceration

Although the previous discussion urges caution in the conclusions regarding the consequences of incarceration, it is hard to ignore the weight of the evidence across a variety of outcomes. Because much of the increase in the U.S. incarceration rate was policy driven (Raphael, 2007; Spelman, 2000), many people point to the policy implications of the “collateral” consequences of incarceration. Wakefield and Wildeman (2011) do not shy away from this debate, arguing for a shift in correctional policies that would reduce the use of imprisonment for nonviolent first-time offenders with no history of domestic abuse. This is a good example of a well-informed recommendation for several reasons. First, the prison boom was driven largely by an increased risk of incarceration for nonviolent drug and property offenders (Blumstein and Beck, 1999). Moreover, it seems, as Wakefield and Wildeman suggest, that in some respects children in these families suffer more harmful consequences of incarceration than children whose parents are incarcerated for violent offenses (see also Wildeman and Western, 2010). Indeed, despite widespread agreement that strong families are a source of social support and can inhibit criminal behavior in children, correctional policies in the United States have resulted in more vulnerable families and thus have contributed to a breakdown of the family in some communities (Wildeman and Western, 2010).

Wakefield and Wildeman (2011) rightly point out that efforts need to be made to curb our reliance on incarceration as a form of social control. After decades of unprecedented growth, the incarceration rate has more recently stabilized, and policy makers would be wise to follow up this stabilization with concerted efforts to reduce our prison population—in particular for first-time, nonviolent offenders—which would have a host of economic and social benefits. Yet little social or political support has been given to decrease the size of the penal system dramatically, and policy recommendations—on some level—need this type of support if they have any hope of being implemented. Although even a small reduction in the prison population would save billions annually and result in numerous positive social outcomes, we consider it unlikely and look to politically feasible alternatives.

Focusing policy recommendations on the approximately 700,000 individuals released from prison each year might be a more effective approach. In our view, ample opportunity exists to consider policy changes that might help this population. We now briefly review some key dimensions of the reentry process, focusing on established research before concluding with areas where more research is necessary to inform policy. In doing so, we highlight the following steps of the criminal justice process where we believe correctional policy could encourage successful reintegration: reentry preparation and postcorrectional supervision.

The successful reintegration of former offenders does not begin at release. Rather, it begins while the offender is still under state control. Unfortunately, however, widespread shifts in correctional policy that accompanied the prison boom have decreased the correctional emphasis on preparation for life after release. As prison populations swelled, the money allocated to support rehabilitation programs did not follow suit (Petersilia, 2003),
which has resulted in less institutional programming for inmates. At the same time, research has shown that the rate of prison program participation has declined since the early 1990s (Lynch and Sabol, 2001). Although we understand that correctional administrators often face budgetary struggles in even attempting to maintain institutional security, we feel that, by failing to prepare individuals for reentry, correctional policies are likely contributing to the significant “churning” of offenders between prison and the community.

Part of the issue seems to stem from a long-standing view that postrelease supervision (e.g., parole) should oversee the successful reintegration of individuals back into society (Wilkinson, 2001). However, as the yearly release cohort continues to grow, more and more returning offenders encounter postrelease realities in which programs are underfunded and have fewer resources available. Thus, any progress correctional authorities can make in preparing offenders for reentry could ease the burden placed on postrelease programs and improve offenders’ chances for success. Indeed, as others have pointed out, improving the prospects of returning offenders can have positive ripple effects throughout the correctional system and society in general (Travis, 2005).

Although a greater institutional commitment toward preparation for release would certainly better prepare individuals for life after prison, the reality is that the time immediately after release is more consequential in determining long-term successful reintegration. Unfortunately, the current reality suggests that many postcorrectional policies serve to increase the odds of reintegration failures (Travis, 2005). Two disconcerting trends seem to characterize best the current postrelease reality that many ex-inmates face. First, just as incarceration policies have become more punitive, postrelease supervision strategies have shifted away from long-standing models of support and assistance toward a greater emphasis on surveillance and control (Petersilia, 2003; Travis, 2005). This shift, not surprisingly, has led to an increased number of technical violations and recommitments. For example, the Bureau of Justice Statistics followed more than 270,000 ex-inmates and found that approximately half were reincarcerated within 3 years, of whom more than half were for technical violations such as a missed meeting or failed drug test (Langan and Levin, 2002). Thus, the adoption of punitive postcorrection policies inevitably uncovers individual failures that only serve to increase the number of “churners” in the general prison population.

Second, emphasis on surveillance comes at a cost, as now a much smaller “safety net” exists to help inmates navigate through their reentry process and successfully transition back into society. In fact, for a sizeable portion of those released from prison there is no safety net to help ease the transition back to society. Between 1970 and 2000, a fivefold increase was noted in the number of unconditional releases—meaning without correctional support or supervision—from prison (see Travis and Lawrence, 2002:10). As a result, each year, correctional authorities offer virtually no assistance or oversight to more than 100,000 ex-inmates, leaving them with no institutional bridge to help with employment, family, educational, or health deficits. This emerging laissez-faire approach to the problems inmates face upon release is also problematic in its own right.
In our view, public policy would be best served by striking a balance between these two trends, with an emphasis on shifting postcorrectional policies back toward assistance and reintegration. Not only could this reduce the number of technical violations, but a more complete transition back into society could lessen the harmful effect that incarceration has on a variety of domains, including employment and wages (Pager, 2003; Western, 2002), civic engagement (Uggen et al., 2006), and health functioning (Massoglia, 2008). For instance, policy shifts that focus on employment might be particularly beneficial. We know that steady employment is an important dimension in desistance from criminal activity (Sampson and Laub, 1993; Shover, 1996; Uggen, 2000). Yet studies of ex-offender employment programs have yielded inconsistent findings (Piliavin and Gartner, 1984; Rossi, Berk, and Lenihan, 1980; Saylor and Gaes, 1997; Uggen, 2000). Part of the problem might be in the unfocused job training and placement programs that are common in many correctional jurisdictions. Specific and focused job training coupled with careful matching of released inmates to appropriate jobs might help produce the positive social outcomes associated with employment in adulthood. Furthermore, the impact of a job can extend well beyond the offender. Stable employment would likely ease hardships on the partners and children of ex-inmates. Moreover, jobs can embed ex-inmates in larger social and community organizations, which also would have prosocial benefits.

Inmates also seem to benefit when they have easy access to social service agencies (Zhang, Roberts, and Callanan, 2006). Hipp, Petersilia, and Turner (2010), for instance, found that parolees with social service agencies nearby were less likely to recidivate. However, they also noted that many of these agencies are overburdened by the number of ex-inmates who seek assistance, which can offset their protective effect. In this respect, a simple call to reinvest in programs and agencies with a track record of success seems critically important.

Finally, several areas also remain in which additional research is needed before scholars can make scientifically informed policy recommendations. For example, immediately upon release, many ex-prisoners are faced with serious challenges in finding stable housing, which is a key component of the reentry process (Bradley, Oliver, Richardson, and Slayter, 2001). Clearly, some former inmates return home to their families. For others, however, securing stable housing is extremely problematic, and many inmates reside in homeless shelters or on the street (see the review in Travis, 2005: 236).

The limited research that does exist does not paint a favorable picture for ex-inmate housing prospects (Clear, 2007). Hipp, Turner, and Jannetta (2010) found that, in California, sex offenders who moved after prison tended to settle in more disadvantaged areas, likely reflecting the particularly harsh restrictive and exclusionary practices that sex offenders face (see Travis, 2005: 224). Evidence also suggests that residential instability increases the likelihood of rearrest (Meredith, Speir, Johnson, and Hull, 2003; Steiner, Makarios, and Travis, 2011). Yet, in our view, we still know comparatively little about the long-term residential patterns of inmates upon release, which is a critical gap in our knowledge base. Public policy could be well served by a closer examination of the relationship
between residential mobility and recidivism. Doing so would involve building bridges with the criminological literature, where it has been found that ex-inmates who reside in disadvantaged neighborhoods are more likely to recidivate (Hipp et al., 2010; Kubrin and Stewart, 2006). Researchers should strive to develop a better understanding of the neighborhoods that ex-inmates reside in over time, as well as the implications that patterns of residential mobility have regarding the well-known consequences of incarceration.

Ultimately, filling these research gaps is critically important to both understanding the ever-widening consequences of incarceration and for making informed policy recommendations. Although we have identified some challenges researchers face, we also believe that this line of research can be a great resource to help guide future correctional and postcorrectional policy.

References


Raphael, Steven. 2007. Understanding the causes and labor market consequences of the steep increase in U.S. incarceration rates. *New Labor Market Institutions and the Public
Policy Essay  Mass Imprisonment and Childhood Behavioral Problems


Michael Massoglia is Assistant Professor of Sociology and Crime, Law & Justice at Penn State University. His current projects examine the impact of incarceration on neighborhood disadvantage as well as the historical context of criminal deportation in the United States.

Cody Warner is a PhD candidate in the Penn State Department of Sociology. His research focuses on the stratifying effects of incarceration, the neighborhood destinations of ex-inmates, and the police response to public protest events.