

Haskins, A. (2013). Mass Imprisonment, Educational Inequality, and the Intergenerational Transmission of Disadvantage: Effects of Paternal Incarceration on Children's Educational Outcomes and School Contexts

Abstract

In this era of mass incarceration, understanding and documenting intergenerational effects of mass imprisonment have become increasingly important, as a growing number of school-aged children in the United States have incarcerated or formerly incarcerated parents. However, though some sociologists have examined the way mass incarceration affects various aspects of stratification for the imprisoned individual, remarkably few have investigated how it shapes the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage, and virtually none have explored the impacts on children's educational outcomes. By bringing literature on educational inequalities into dialogue with research on the consequences of imprisonment, my dissertation makes three substantive contributions to scholarship on the implications of mass incarceration for inequality among U.S. children. Using quasi-experimental methods along with the Fragile Families Study, the first paper demonstrates that experiencing paternal incarceration by age 5 is associated with lower non-cognitive school readiness, and that this effect is concentrated among white and black boys. The second paper follows the same study children into elementary school and asks whether paternal incarceration has a negative impact on cognitive and non-cognitive skill development at age 9. Results from these first two chapters suggest paternal incarceration has initial and continuing deleterious impacts on children's educational outcomes. Evidence of effect heterogeneity by both race and gender suggests paternal incarceration as a pathway for the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage from parent to child and a potential contributor to the persistence of racial and gender differences in early educational outcomes. The last article makes use of newly available data on children's elementary school environments to provide a descriptive picture of the types of schools children with incarcerated fathers attend. Using climatic, compositional and structural school context characteristics, I explore the potential moderating role of schools on the effect of paternal incarceration on children, assessing the ways in which schools serve as agents in both the attenuation and exacerbation of negative consequences of paternal incarceration for children's educational outcomes. Together, these papers show how three of the most powerful social institutions in the U.S.—the family, the school, and the penal system—jointly contribute to educational disparities and the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage.