



Incarceration and Housing Insecurity Among Urban Fathers

Background

Housing security is an important component of economic and emotional wellbeing, particularly among disadvantaged populations. Among those returning from incarceration, stable housing is especially critical. To begin with, housing insecurity (e.g., homelessness, eviction, doubling-up, etc.) may prevent ex-prisoners from gaining consistent access to treatment for health and substance abuse problems upon release. In addition, stable housing is necessary for securing and maintaining regular employment. Applicants may be asked to provide a residential address with a job application, and contact information is required for employers to follow-up with potential employees. Furthermore, housing insecurity may increase the risk of recidivism if it drives individuals to sleep in public or loiter (potential public order violations), or lose contact with parole officers.

Despite its importance, stable housing may be difficult to procure, especially for formerly incarcerated individuals. Ex-prisoners may be excluded from housing markets through background checks, and denied or evicted from public housing based on “one strike and you’re out” policies. Additionally, parole restrictions, relationship strains, and partners’ new relationships may prevent ex-prisoners from moving in with family and friends. Another serious stumbling block is a reduction in earnings. Upon re-entry, ex-prisoners may face challenges gaining access to the labor market. Limited credit and/or rental histories as well as welfare restrictions further reduce available resources. Research is needed to determine whether the obstacles faced by ex-prisoners extend beyond those experienced by other socially and economically disadvantaged individuals.

This brief contributes to our knowledge of the challenges faced by ex-prisoners (particularly urban fathers) upon re-entry in two ways. First, it examines the relationship between recent incarceration and housing insecurity net of other factors known to characterize social and economic disadvantage. Second, it investigates the extent to which the association between incarceration and housing insecurity is associated with decreased post-incarceration earnings. A relationship between incarceration and housing insecurity that is due to earnings would imply a need for programs and policies to support post-release employment.

Data and Methods

Data come from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study, which follows a cohort of nearly 5,000 couples with children born between 1998 and 2000. Couples were sampled from births in 75 hospitals throughout 20 large US cities. Unmarried couples were oversampled, creating a sample with high levels of social and economic disadvantage, including low levels of income and education and a large amount (40%) of formerly incarcerated fathers. Follow-up interviews took place one, three, and five years after the birth of the focal child. Analyses are limited to all individuals who responded to questions on living situations at year 5 and were not incarcerated at the time of the survey ($n = 2,768$).

Housing insecurity is an aggregate measure based on respondents’ living situations at each wave of data collection. Respondents are considered to have insecure housing if they report experiencing homelessness, eviction, living with others without paying rent, being forced to move in

with someone else due to financial constraints, or having more than one change of residence per year. To examine the impact of incarceration on homelessness specifically, researchers used a question that asked whether the respondent had experienced homelessness in the past year. Incarceration is measured using mother and father reports of whether the father had spent any time in jail or prison between years 1 and 5. Other variables include annual earnings at year 5 (a potential mechanism), and lagged values of housing insecurity at year 1 (skipped payment, evicted, doubled-up, homeless, lived with others without paying rent, and moved more than once per year). Socioeconomic characteristics are included as controls.

Logistic regression models are used to determine the relationship between incarceration and housing insecurity, independent of other characteristics of disadvantage. The first model estimates the effect of incarceration on insecurity, net of socioeconomic covariates. The second model examines the influence of incarceration while controlling not only for socioeconomic covariates, but for various types of insecurity at year 1. Thus, results in this model represent the impact of incarceration on a change in housing security between years 1 and 5, beyond what is experienced by men not incarcerated. Finally, the third model estimates the extent to which the relationship between incarceration and

insecurity is due to a reduction in earnings, by including a control for annual earnings at year 5. To further investigate the influence of incarceration on housing insecurity, these three models are repeated using homelessness as the outcome variable.

Results

Results of the logistic regression models are summarized in the following tables. Table 1 presents the effects of recent incarceration (between years 1 and 5) and earnings on general housing insecurity. Results indicate that, controlling only for socioeconomic covariates, the odds of experiencing housing insecurity in the past year for men who have been recently incarcerated are 69% higher than the odds for men who have not been recently incarcerated. Even when controlling for housing insecurity at year 1 and annual earnings, the difference remains significant, suggesting that the relationship is robust. Men with higher annual earnings are less likely to experience housing insecurity, but even when accounting for earnings, the odds of experiencing housing insecurity are 50% greater among the recently incarcerated.

Table 2 shows a similar pattern in differences by incarceration, but the impact on the odds of experiencing

Table 1. Summary of Logistic Regression Models Predicting Past-Year Housing Insecurity (Any)

Variables	Model 1 Control for Socioeconomic Characteristics ^a	Model 2 Add Year 1 Insecurity	Model 3 Add Year 5 Earnings
Y1-Y5 Incarceration	69% increase in odds*	65% increase in odds*	50% increase in odds*
Y5 Earnings (logged)	n/a	n/a	10% reduction in odds*

*Denotes statistical significance at the 1 percent level; n/a indicates variable not applicable.

^a Includes race, ethnicity, nativity, age, cognitive ability, grew up with both parents, maternal depression, impulsivity, relationship status (married vs. cohabiting vs. nonresident) at baseline, education level at baseline, employment status at baseline, substance use at baseline, and self-reported health status at baseline.

Table 2. Summary of Logistic Regression Models Predicting Past-Year Housing Insecurity (Homelessness)

Variables	Model 1 Control for Socioeconomic Characteristics ^a	Model 2 Add Year 1 Insecurity	Model 3 Add Year 5 Earnings
Y1-Y5 Incarceration	181% increase in odds*	168% increase in odds*	56% increase in odds
Y5 Earnings (logged)	n/a	n/a	14% reduction in odds*

**Denotes statistical significance at the 1 percent level; n/a indicates variable not applicable.*

^a Includes race, ethnicity, nativity, age, cognitive ability, grew up with both parents, maternal depression, impulsivity, relationship status (married vs. cohabiting vs. nonresident) at baseline, education level at baseline, employment status at baseline, substance use at baseline, and self-reported health status at baseline.

homelessness is more severe. When adjusting for socioeconomic characteristics, the odds of experiencing homelessness in the past year for men who have been recently released from jail or prison are more than twice as high as the odds for those not recently incarcerated. The impact of incarceration remains high and significant even when controlling for insecurity at year 1, but the odds of experiencing homelessness decrease when adjusting for annual earnings. Higher annual earnings are associated with a reduction in the odds of experiencing homelessness.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Findings suggest that housing insecurity, especially homelessness, is considerably more prevalent among recently incarcerated urban men, even when controlling for potential confounders. Findings further suggest that some of the relationship between incarceration and housing insecurity is due to lower earnings. Having higher annual earnings significantly reduces the likelihood of experiencing unstable housing, suggesting that employment may be a protective factor for ex-prisoners upon re-entry.

These results have three limitations. First, because the sample is comprised of fathers rather than ex-prisoners,

findings are not likely to generalize to incarcerated men without children. Second, as homelessness may differ between individuals released from jail and those released from prison, results are further limited by the inability to distinguish between the two. Third, causal inferences should be made with caution as differences by incarceration may actually be due to unobserved characteristics of the fathers.

Consistent with previous research, these findings provide evidence that urban men returning from jail or prison represent a high-risk population. Securing and maintaining regular employment may help to reduce prisoner vulnerability upon release. Policy makers, employers, and correctional entities each play an important role in ensuring the successful re-entry of ex-prisoners. Evidence-based educational and work programs should be accessible to prisoners prior to and upon release. In addition, policy makers could promote the hiring of ex-prisoners by limiting their disqualifications and by providing tax incentives for employers to hire the formerly incarcerated. Corrections agencies may also provide direct assistance to returning prisoners, such as transitional housing and employment support. Most importantly, criminal cases should be considered individually with respect to the provision of transitional housing, employment support, drug treatment, and other services in order to ensure stable housing.

FRAGILE FAMILIES RESEARCH BRIEF

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For more information about the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, go to <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu>. To review public and working papers from the Fragile Families Study, go to <http://crcw.princeton.edu/publications/publications.asp>.

This research brief was adapted from “A Sort of Homecoming: Incarceration and the Housing Security of Urban Men” by Amanda Geller and Marah A. Curtis (published in *Social Science Research*, July 2011, Vol. 40, Issue 4, pgs. 1196-1213).

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