

Economic Inequality and the Rise in U.S. Imprisonment

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Abstract

This paper relates the growth in men's prison admission rates to increasing economic inequality through the 1980s and 1990s. Previous research on incarceration examined national or state-level data, but this analysis constructs detailed annual prison admission rates for age-education-race subgroups. Analysis indicates a significant increase in educational inequality in incarceration; nearly all the growth in the risk of imprisonment between 1983 and 1999 was confined to noncollege men. Regressions of admission rates on men's labor market outcomes indicates the negative effects of wages and employment on black men's incarceration, and the negative effects hourly wages for white men. If 1980s wage and employment levels persisted through the late 1990s, estimate suggest that prison admission rates would be be 15 to 20 percent lower for men at all levels of education.

Two major social trends reduced the living standards of young low-education American men over the last thirty years. The earnings of men with just a high school education were eroded by the tide of rising U.S. income inequality. While wages fell, growth in the American penal system turned prison and jail time into common life events for low-skill and minority men. The new inequality and the prison boom both date from the mid-1970s, and both trends continued through the end of 1990s. Has the growth in economic inequality contributed to the growth in American imprisonment?

Incarceration might be connected to economic inequality in two main ways. Rising inequality may increase crime at the bottom of the social hierarchy, generating more arrests, convictions, and prison admissions. Thus Richard Freeman (1996) argued that young black men turned to crime in response declining job opportunities through the 1980s and 1990s. Troy Duster (1997), similarly claims that the collapse of legitimate employment in poor urban neighborhoods drew young black men into the illegal drug trade, steeply increasing their risks of arrest and incarceration. For sociologists of punishment, criminal law functions not just to control crime, but also to contain marginal populations that are perceived as threatening by elites and voters. The direct link between contemporary economic inequality and punishment was forcefully claimed by Loïc Wacquant. Like Freeman and Duster, Wacquant (2000) sees recent growth in the penal system as closely connected to the decline of urban labor markets in the later postwar period. In Wacquant's analysis, the "prisonization of the ghetto" represents just the latest form of institutionalized white supremacy—a social response to the demise of the ghetto as an economically viable, yet controlling, institution in the lives of African Americans.

We examine the relationship between economic inequality and the grow-

ing risk of men's prison admission between 1983 and 1999. Previous research associated aggregate measures of inequality with aggregate incarceration rates, either in samples of U.S. states or national time series (e.g., Jacobs and Helms 1996, 2001; Greenberg and West 2001). This approach misses a central implication of inequality theories of incarceration: that economic inequality expands criminal punishment among the disadvantaged, increasing inequality in incarceration. We adopt a novel approach in this paper by calculating the risk of imprisonment for white and black men at different ages and levels of education. We then relate these disaggregated risks to disaggregated measures of economic status. In contrast to previous aggregate-level research, our design produces a tighter link between the economic status of the disadvantaged and their involvement in the criminal justice system.

THE PRISON BOOM

Growth in the American penal system involved a spectacular change in the functions of state government and dramatic shifts in the life course of low-education men. About two-thirds of the American correctional population are housed in state or federal prisons serving sentences for felony convictions of a year or longer. Between 1920 and 1970, the prison incarceration rate hovered around 100 per 100,000 of the U.S. population. In 1970, the imprisonment rate at 96 per 100,000, stood near its historic average. By 2001 the rate of prison incarceration had increased to 470 per 100,000. Growth in the prison population was driven by an increase in prison admissions and increasing time served by prisoners once admitted. Figure 1 shows that between 1977 and 1998 the state and federal prison population grew more than fourfold to include about 1.3 million inmates by the end of the 1990s. Annual prison admissions expanded by a similar margin; more than 600,000 people

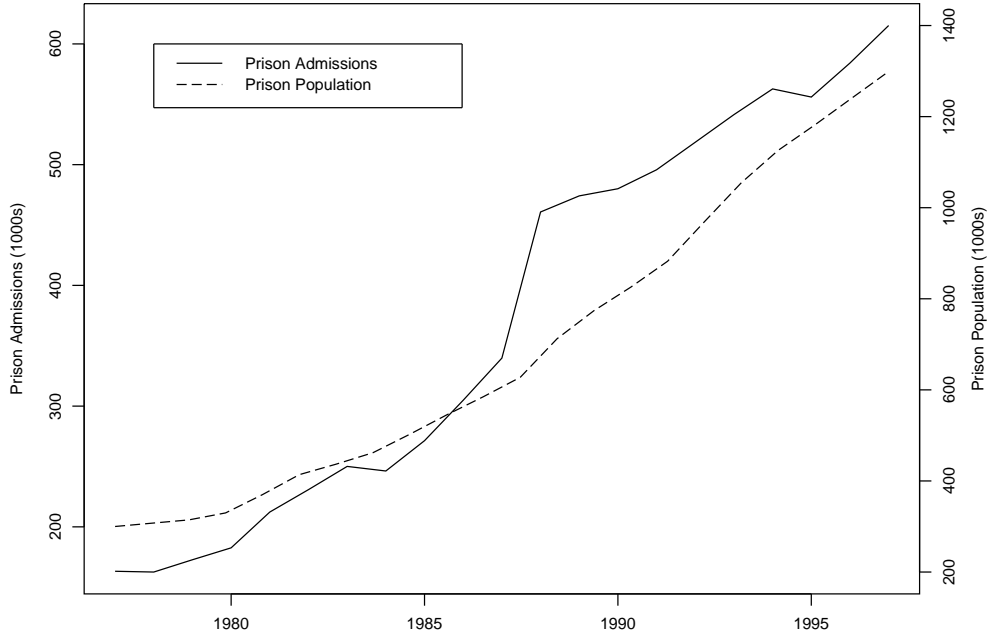


Figure 1. Numbers of prisoners admitted to state or federal jurisdiction, 1977–1998 (left-hand axis); number of prisoners under state or federal jurisdiction, 1977–1998 (right-hand axis). Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Prisoner Statistics data series (NPS-1).

are now annually sentenced to a year or more in state or federal custody.

Our analysis examines prison admission rates because they are likely to have the most immediate relationship to economic inequality. A rising gap between rich and poor may affect admissions by increasing crime rates among low income men, or increasing the rates of arrest and court commitment to prison. Contrast time served that is only observed at release. In this case, the effects of inequality will only be seen with a long and indeterminate lag. We might also follow other research in analyzing incarceration rates (e.g., Jacobs and Helms 1996; Greenberg and West 2001), but this bundles

together the immediate effect of inequality on admissions and the lagged effect of inequality on time served.

Aggregate figures on imprisonment conceal large educational and racial disparities. According to the 1997 Survey of Inmates of State Prisons, prisoners average less than 11 years of schooling compared to more than 13 years of schooling among men under age 40 in the noninstitutional population (Western and Pettit 1999). Censuses of correctional facilities find that the imprisonment rate of African Americans is about 7 times higher than that of whites. Disaggregated prison admission rates that capture these inequalities can be calculated using data from the National Corrections Reporting Program (NCRP). The NCRP data provide an annual census of all prison admissions and releases in 38 reporting states, covering 80 to 90 percent of the total prison population. The NCRP data record a prisoner's age, race and ethnicity, education, and offense. Combining the NCRP data with aggregate figures on total male prison admissions yields estimates of the proportion of the population annually entering prison for white and black men at different ages and levels of education.

Table 1 reports prison admission rates for young black and white men from 1983 and 1999. Unlike most studies of imprisonment, we distinguish admission rates for those without high school diplomas or GEDs, high school graduates, and those with at least some college. For blacks and whites, high school dropouts are about 5 times more likely to go to prison in a given year than men who have completed high school. The prison admission rate rose sharply for low-education men but little among the college-educated. Racial disparities are also pronounced. In line with aggregate statistics on incarceration rates, the NCRP data indicate that rates of prison admission for African Americans are 5 to 10 times higher than for whites. The combina-

Table 1. Percent of noninstitutional men, aged 20–39, annually entering prison, by education and race, 1983–1999.

	1983–88	1989–94	1995–99
<i>Whites</i>			
Less than H.S.	1.71	2.58	3.21
High School or GED	.30	.41	.57
Some College	.05	.06	.06
<i>Blacks</i>			
Less than H.S.	7.82	15.31	16.90
High School or GED	1.59	2.71	3.16
Some College	.48	.78	.60

tion of racial and educational inequality strikingly affect young black male dropouts. The NCRP data indicate that 1 in 6 black male dropouts annually went to prison in the late 1990s. The protective effects of college education are also shown, as fewer than one percent of college-educated black men were admitted to prison in 1999.

INEQUALITY AND THE PRISON BOOM

The link between rising inequality and growth in the penal population might be traced to criminal offending or the social control efforts of criminal justice authorities. If increasing inequality raises crime rates at the bottom of the stratification hierarchy, more offenders will be supplied to the penal system. Increased disadvantage may cause some social groups to be viewed as more dangerous and threatening to social order, attracting punitive treatment by lawmakers and criminal justice officials.

Inequality and Crime

Lower class criminality is typically explained by a strain theory in which the goal of material success is widely held in society, but opportunities to legitimately attain that goal are unequally distributed. In Merton's (1968, 223) seminal argument "the moral mandate to achieve success . . . exerts pressure to succeed by fair means if possible and by foul means if necessary." Frustration at blocked opportunities drives the poor to crime so they might access the material success enjoyed legally by the middle class. Blau and Blau (1982) go further, arguing that ascriptive inequality (like racial inequality), more than inequality based on achievement, appears particularly illegitimate. High levels of racial inequality, rather than economic disadvantage, may fan the frustrations that trigger crime.

In contrast to strain theory that suggests how economic conditions can push people into crime, social control theories emphasize constraints that prevent offending. The routines of steady employment, independent of its economic attractions, reduce opportunities for offending. Adopting the language of segmented labor markets, researchers find that men in primary sector jobs—where work is consistent, routinized and monitored—commit less crime than men in the secondary labor market where employment is irregular (Sullivan 1989; Crutchfield and Pitchford 1997). Research on criminal desistance similarly shows that continuity of employment provides a pathway out of crime for men with criminal histories (Sampson and Laub 1993; Uggen 1999).

Economic disadvantage may also erode informal social control indirectly, through its association with family disruption and neighborhood poverty (Shihadeh and Steffensmeier 1994). Stable two-parent families can monitor children's activities and divert them from the peer networks that provide a

familiar context for delinquency (Sampson 1987). Poor families—that are more likely to be headed by a single parent—have fewer resources to restrain delinquency (Hagan 1993). Although juvenile crime is often the focus of research on the effects of family disruption, stable marriages, like steady jobs, are found to be a key source of criminal desistance among adult men with a history of offending (Sampson and Laub 1993; Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998). Given that marriage rates are lower among poor (particularly minority) men (Ellwood and Jencks 2001), economic disadvantage may also work indirectly to foster crime among adults.

The crime-inequality connection is empirically supported by evidence of high crime rates at the bottom of the social ladder. Braithwaite's (1979) expansive review of research before 1980 describes two sorts of effects. First, official records from police and courts indicate lower class men and male youth are more involved in crime and delinquency than those with middle class backgrounds. Second, there is also support for an ecological effect in which individuals in poor and minority neighborhoods commit crime at relatively high rates, regardless of their social class. More recent literature reviews have examined other economic conditions. Time series and panel studies of states and counties often report that crime rates are positively related to unemployment and other measures of joblessness (see the reviews of Chiricos 1987; Freeman 1995).

Has research on class and crime examined the historical context of rising U.S. income inequality? Several quantitative studies estimate the effects of the new American inequality, and ethnographic research sees urban drug dealing as a response to the decline of urban labor markets. Analyzing city and state level data from three census years, Land, McCall, and Cohen (1990) estimate the effects of an omnibus measure of economic deprivation—

a weighted sum of the poverty rate, a Gini index of family income inequality, and median family income. The estimated effect of economic deprivation on homicide rates increases at the city and state levels between 1950 and 1980 (Liska and Bellair 1995 report similar results). LaFree and Drass (1997) find that race-specific arrest rates increased during periods of rising intra-racial income inequality. These findings capitalize on the sharp increase in crime rates between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s. Richard Freeman (1996) considers the new inequality of the late twentieth century, arguing that “the depressed labor market for less skilled men in the 1980s and 1990s has contributed to the rise in criminal activity by less skilled men.” Despite this claim, no consistent relationship between income inequality and aggregate crime rates has been found for the two decades from 1980. Fowles and Merva (1996) analyze 28 metropolitan areas between 1975 and 1990 and find a stable association between household income inequality for several categories of violent crime. Doyle and his colleagues (1999) could not reproduce this result in their study of crime rates in 48 states from 1984 to 1993. Analysis of national youth homicide arrests, 1967–1998, also failed to find a robust effect for income inequality (Messner et al. 2001). Quantitative analyses of the 1980s and 1990s, when inequality increased sharply, offer little sustained support for the inequality-crime relationship.

A key limitation of the quantitative research is that crime among the poor is inferred from aggregate crime rates for the whole population. Ethnographic research helps fill the gap by studying crime in poor urban neighborhoods. Urban ethnographers have identified entrepreneurial gangs as a key source of economic opportunity for young men in urban communities characterized by high and persistent rates of joblessness. Bourgois’s (1996) ethnographic research on Hispanic drug gangs views the sale and distribution of crack co-

caine as a response to depleted economic opportunities in inner cities. Sudhir Venkatesh and Steven Levitt (2000) find that drug gangs have become important economic organizations in poor urban areas. Their research on Chicago's "outlaw capitalism" shows that drug gangs have a well-defined organizational hierarchy in which incomes are steeply graduated from the street sellers at the bottom to the managers at the top. Other researchers more generally claim that drug dealing in inner cities proliferated as legitimate employment opportunities for low-skill men diminished in the 1980s and 1990s (Duster 1997; Tonry 1995; Anderson 1999).

Theories of strain and informal social control suggest why crime rates, and consequently incarceration rates, might be high among the disadvantaged. Research indicates that growth in crime in the decade from 1965 is related to rising income inequality. Evidence for the crime-inequality relationship is weaker for the 1980s and 1990s. Still, ethnographers report that drug dealing became more common among poor young men in response to the collapse of low-skill urban labor markets in the 1980s.

Inequality and Social Control

In the sociology of punishment, criminal behavior in the population is only weakly related to the scale of imprisonment (Garland 1991). Instead criminal punishment expresses authorities' reaction to the perceived menace of marginal populations. Inspiration for this argument is often traced to Georg Rusche (1978 [1933]; Rusche and Kirchheimer 1939) who viewed historic variation in forms of punishment—fines, torture, imprisonment—as products of the economic situation of the dispossessed. The unemployed, representing the most desperate and crime-prone workers, occupy a special place in this theory. Elites would stem the threat of rising crime by intensifying pun-

ishment as the surplus population expanded; the level of punishment would then contract under conditions of labor scarcity.

For the contemporary descendants of Georg Rusche, the criminal justice system embodies a social conflict between authorities and marginal populations. While Rusche viewed punishment chiefly as means to deter crime, modern proponents see punishment as controlling a broad array of threats to social order posed by troublesome populations. The level of punishment is expected to vary with the size of the troublesome group. Empirical studies defined threatening populations in terms of their employment status, (e.g., Box and Hale 1982), race or ethnicity (Hall 1978), or some combination of the two (Melossi 1989; Spohn and Halleran 2000). If not through crime, how do marginal populations endanger social order? Some claim that troublesome populations are viewed by authorities as jeopardizing not just public safety, but the economic order in general (Quinney 1974; Spitzer 1975). The able-bodied poor may refuse to work, steal from the rich, reject the dominant values of hard work and achievement, and advocate revolutionary change (Spitzer 1975). The destabilizing potential of low-income young men at the bottom of the social structure is well-captured by Spitzer's (1975, 645) term, "social dynamite," evoking volatility more than chronic disadvantage.

In the abstract, social threat accounts of punishment sound conspiratorial. By what concrete process do dominant groups actively use the state's legitimate violence against those who are relatively powerless? Three specific mechanisms connect social and economic disadvantage to criminal justice supervision. First, legislators perceiving poor and marginal populations as dangerous or unruly may write criminal law to contain the threat. In the course of the prison boom, trends in drug sentencing were thus widely associated with intensified criminalization of poor urban minorities (Tonry 1995;

Dubber 2001). Over the past three decades, Congress and state legislatures adopted mandatory prison sentences for drug possession or trafficking (Bureau of Justice Assistance 1998, 7). Consequently, the risks of imprisonment given arrest and the proportion of drug offenders in state prison increased sharply between 1980 and 1996 (Blumstein and Beck 1999). Second, police may surveil and arrest the poor more frequently than the affluent. Police partly focus their efforts in poor urban communities because more of daily life, and illegal activity, transpires in public space. Ethnographers suggest that the purchase and consumption of drugs, drunkenness, and domestic disturbances are more likely to take place in public in urban areas, but in private homes in the suburbs. Consequently, poor urban residents are more exposed to police scrutiny and risk arrest more than their suburban counterparts. (e.g., Duneier 2000; Anderson 1999; Bourgois 1996). Police also tend to view poor minorities as more involved in crime, treating them with greater suspicion (Wilson 1968, ch. 2; Chambliss 2000). Third, judges may treat poor defendants harshly once in court. Judges can view poor defendants as more culpable with less potential for rehabilitation (Kluegel 1990; Steffensmeier, Ulmer, and Kramer 1998, 770; Greenberg 1977; Albonetti 1991). Thus, controlling for offense characteristics and criminal history, sentencing research finds the highest probability of incarceration among low-status unemployed defendants—either minorities or those living in high unemployment areas (Spohn and Holleran 2000; D’Alessio and Stolzenberg 2002).

Social threat accounts of punishment suggest that rising inequality may increase incarceration among the disadvantaged. Most research on the economic determinants of incarceration follow Rusche and Kirchheimer, by studying the effects of unemployment and other measures of surplus population. Chiricos and Delone (1992) report that national time series analyses consis-

tently show a positive effect of unemployment on prison admissions. However, this pattern does not hold in the 1990s when historically low unemployment rates were associated with high levels of incarceration (Michalowski and Carlson 1999).

Although economic analysis of criminal punishment focuses on unemployment effects, several studies examine the impact of economic inequality. Strongest results are reported by Jacobs and Helms (1996; 2001) who find several positive and significant effects of income inequality on imprisonment rates (1953–1998) and prison admission rates (1950–1990). Inequality effects are much weaker in samples of states or counties where cross-sectional variation predominates. Panel studies of states show that Gini indexes on family incomes are only weakly related to prison incarceration rates, once crime rates and the racial composition of the population are controlled (Greenberg and West 2001). Jacobs and Carmichael (2001) fit a fixed effect model to panel data, showing that states with the largest increases in inequality, did not experience the largest increases in incarceration rates.

Previous research unevenly supports the inequality-incarceration relationship, but aggregated measurement and inefficient research designs may have prevented strong findings. Theories linking inequality to imprisonment claim that a growing gap between rich and poor results in increasing social control of the disadvantaged. Still, nearly all studies of the effects of inequality analyze aggregate crime and incarceration rates. These rates may be defined on the whole U.S. population, or for states or metropolitan areas. A few studies separate the involvement of blacks and whites in the criminal justice system (LaFree and Drass 1996; Bridges and Crutchfield 1988), but even here race is used as a proxy for economic status and the possibility that affluent blacks are treated differently from poor blacks is obscured by the aggregated

research design. A strong test of the effects of inequality on incarceration requires a more disaggregated analysis where incarceration risks are observed for different segments of the population.

Incarceration research on economic effects also apply inefficient designs that use relatively little information in statistical analysis. Time series studies, which offer the strongest support for inequality effects on incarceration, rely on data sets of 30 or 40 time points. In these analyses there are frequently a wide range of plausible models and long lists of correlated covariates. Results are thus highly sensitive to the choice of model. Panel studies of states use more information, but time series tend to be sparse consisting of just two or three time points (Jacobs and Carmichael 2001; Greenberg and West 2001; Beckett and Western 2001). Growth in inequality has been uneven, accelerating in the early 1980s and flattening out at a high level through the 1990s. This variation is missed in panel studies. A stronger design would examine annual variation in a cross-section of the population, capturing the ebb and flow of the widening gap between rich and poor households.

A DISAGGREGATED ANALYSIS OF IMPRISONMENT

To address the limits of previous research we develop a disaggregated approach to estimating the effects of economic inequality on incarceration. Using annual data for 1983 to 1999, men's probability of going to prison is calculated for age-race-education groups by combining data from the NCRP and data on the noninstitutional population. These admission rates are estimated for four age groups, (1) 20–24, (2) 25–29, (3) 30–34, (4) 35–39; three levels of schooling, (1) high school dropouts, (2) those with high school diplomas or equivalency but no college, and (3) those with at least some college; and two race groups, (1) non-Hispanic whites, and (2) non-Hispanic blacks.

This coding scheme provides a $4 \times 3 \times 2$ table for each of 17 years, yielding a sample of 408 admission rates for analysis. Admission rates calculated from the NCRP are largely consistent with those from other data sources (see Appendix), and the large samples of the NCRP allow sharp estimates of admission rates for specific subgroups.

Our key predictors of prison admission are disaggregated measures of employment and weekly earnings, calculated from the merged outgoing rotation group files of the Current Population Survey. Like the prison admission rates, annual earnings and employment figures are calculated for men's age-race-education subgroups. Median weekly earnings data indicate a clear race gap that has persisted among young men through the 1980s and 1990s (Table 2). Between 1983 and 1999, the weekly earnings of young white men exceeded those of young blacks at the same level of education by 25 to 30 percent. The table also indicates increasing inequality by education among white men that is well-documented in other research (e.g., Bernhardt et al. 2002). In the 1980s, young white men with at least some college education earned 48 percent more than young white male dropouts. By the late 1990s, this earnings gap had grown to 62 percent. The growth in inequality was not mirrored among black men because of the large decline in weekly earnings for the college-educated. The earnings of black male high school dropouts were also more robust than the earnings of their white counterparts. This may reflect an improvement in the relative market position of black male dropouts during the low-unemployment period of the 1990s (Freeman and Rodgers 2001). The growth in earnings may also be an artifact of the high incarceration rate in this group, in which 30 percent of low-earnings men are in prison or jail (Western and Pettit 1999).

Table 3 reports trends in employment by education for young black and

Table 2. Median weekly earnings (1999 dollars) of male workers, aged 20–40, by education, race and ethnicity, 1983–1988 and 1995–1999.

	Less Than High School	High School or Equivalency	Some College	College-Dropout Earnings Ratio
<i>Whites</i>				
1983–1988	457.82	552.40	678.35	1.48
1995–1999	403.80	502.04	653.95	1.62
<i>Blacks</i>				
1983–1988	345.13	435.20	554.80	1.61
1995–1999	314.76	387.61	490.36	1.56

white men. Employment is measured by the percentage of the noninstitutional population who are in full-time or part-time employment. Employment rates for whites at different levels of education remained stable through the 1980s and 1990s. About three-quarters of young white dropouts were employed in comparison to about 90 percent of those with at least a high school education. In contrast, employment declined among black dropouts, from 58.6 to 51.1 percent but grew slightly among the college-educated. In short, earnings inequality has grown among young white men in the 1980s and 1990s, but employment inequality has grown among young black men.

To study the effects of earnings and employment on imprisonment we write a regression for the prison admission rate p_{tijk} , the proportion of the non-institutional population going to prison in year $t = 1983, \dots, 1999$, for men in race i ($i = \text{black, or white}$) at education level j ($j = < \text{HS, HS/GED, } > \text{HS}$), in age-group k ($k = 20\text{--}24, 25\text{--}29, 30\text{--}34, 35\text{--}39$). The effects of earnings and employment on the risk of prison admission can be written with the regression equation:

$$\log(p_{tijk}) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 W_{tijk} + \beta_2 E_{tijk} + X'_{tijk} \gamma + \varepsilon_{tijk},$$

Table 3. Average employment to population ratio of men, aged 20–40, by education, race and ethnicity, 1983–1988 and 1995–1999.

	Less Than High School	High School or Equivalency	Some College	College-Dropout Employment Ratio
<i>Whites</i>				
1983–1988	76.6	90.1	86.0	1.12
1995–1999	76.7	89.7	87.1	1.14
<i>Blacks</i>				
1983–1988	58.6	79.0	79.3	1.35
1995–1999	51.1	76.6	82.4	1.61

where W_{tijk} is the median weekly earnings for a specific race-age-education group in year t , E_{tijk} is the subgroup employment rate, X_{tijk} is a vector of other covariates, and ε_{tijk} is an error term.

In this regression analysis, estimates of the effects of wages and employment on the risk of prison admission are subject to two offsetting biases. First simply by taking many low-skill, crime-involved, men out the workforce imprisonment will tend to raise observed levels of employment and earnings. Imprisonment effectively truncates the lower tail of the earnings and employment distribution (Western and Pettit 1999). The positive effect of imprisonment on employment and earnings will tend to bias the expected negative effects of employment and earnings on prison admissions towards zero. On the other had, large numbers of entering prisoners accompany large numbers of prison releases. The re-entry of ex-prisoners into the labor market will tend to lower employment rates and lower wages. This negatively biases the estimated effects of earnings and employment on admission. Under the prison boom, prison admissions have slightly exceeded prison releases so the net bias, at least in the short-term, will tend to be small.

Distinguishing Inequality Effects on Crime and Social Control

Economic inequality may affect prison admissions through the criminal behavior of the disadvantaged or the social control efforts directed at them by criminal justice authorities. In studies of national time series or panels of states, researchers try to isolate the social control effect by statistically adjusting for crime rates (e.g., Jacobs and Helms 1996; see the review of Chiricos and Delone 1992). We extend this approach in several ways. First, national time series and state-level analysis use aggregated measurements of crime. In our analysis, we control for criminal behavior using disaggregated data on race-education groups. Because violent crime usually involves victims and perpetrators with similar social status, we tap crime among blacks and whites at different levels of education with victimization data from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). The NCVS is an annual survey that asks people about their experiences with criminal victimization over the past year. The data can be used to construct victimization rates—the number of victimizations divided by the population—for different offenses and for different subgroups. (We do not disaggregate victimization rates by age because cell counts are too small to provide accurate estimates.) Although disaggregated victimization rates provide an indicator of crime for specific race-education groups, they obviously do not directly measure crime by perpetrators or homicide victimization. Direct measures of crime that include homicide are usually taken from the aggregate crime statistics compiled by the FBI in the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR). We also analyzed prison admission, controlling for UCR crime rates and obtained results substantively identical to those below.

Second, research also indicates that increased imprisonment reduces crime rates (Levitt 1996; Rosenfeld 2000). The dependence of crime rates on im-

prisonment may be a significant source of bias in the 1990s as crime fell while incarceration rates increased. Past analyses of crime rates used instrumental variables to identify exogenous variation in imprisonment that does not depend on the level of crime (Levitt 1996). Instead of trying to identify exogenous variation in crime that might drive imprisonment, we fit fixed effects that capture unmeasured variables that place people at risk of criminal behavior or incarceration. In the most detailed specifications below, we introduce fixed effects for every race-age-year cell in our tabular data. Variation in criminal offending by race, age, and year is well-established in studies of official statistics and victimization data (e.g., Hindelang 1978, 1981; Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990; Land, McCall, and Cohen 1990). Fixed effects—estimated with dummy variables for all race-age-year subgroups—account for all variables that vary by race, age, or year and the interactions among them. For example, the effects of UCR homicide rates which are available annually for blacks and whites above and below age 24 are accounted for by the fixed effects model. We can also think of the fixed effects as tapping the criminal propensity of the population that is not fully reflected in observed crime rates. In the early 1990s, imprisonment rates increased but crime rates held steady leading some to argue that the population’s propensity to commit crime had increased (Freeman 1996). We can treat this propensity as an unobserved variable absorbed by the fixed effects.

Although the current modeling strategy tries to distinguish the effects of crime from social control, there are certainly limitations. Treating fixed effects as capturing only the propensity to commit crime neglects social control processes that mostly affect certain race-age groups, particularly young black men. If drug-war policing and criminal sentencing largely affected young black men across the educational distribution, the social control effect

will be captured by the fixed effects. Criminal sentencing also became more punitive in the 1980s and 1990s and this trend will be captured by yearly fixed effects. On the other hand, the social control component of the economic effects is over-estimated if educational stratification in crime is not fully controlled by the victimization data.

Despite these limitations, the current analysis introduces far more detailed information about the risks of incarceration than prior research. The utility of estimates for the effects of earnings and employment can be examined by studying their robustness to the introduction of age-race fixed effects and victimization rates which are known to be correlated with criminal offending.

RESULTS

Before examining how labor market inequality is related to the risks of prison admission, we use a regression analysis to describe inequality in prison admission by education (Table 4). Controlling for race, the level of violent crime, age, and the upward linear trend in imprisonment rates, the risk of imprisonment among the college educated is only 3% ($e^{-3.41} \approx .03$) as high as the the imprisonment risk among high school dropout. High school education is also associated with a reduced risk of incarceration; as high school graduates are only 20% ($e^{-1.70} \approx .18$) as likely to be sent to prison as dropouts.

The remaining models in Table 4 examine whether education and racial inequality in imprisonment changed over time. Changes in the race and education effects is modeled with interactions with the linear time trend (Year). The interaction effect indicates that educational inequality in incarceration steadily increased. In 1983, prison admission rates among the college educated were only 3 percent high as those for high school dropouts. By 1999,

this relative risk had shrunk to just 1.8 percent. the likelihood of imprisonment among high school graduates relative to dropouts remained stable. In contrast to the increase in educational inequality in imprisonment, there is no evidence of deepening racial inequality. The race-year interaction effect is negligibly small, showing that blacks relative risk of incarceration remained about 7 times higher than that for whites ($e^{1.93} \approx 6.9$), throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

The final two columns of Table reports results separately for black and white men. The large intercept for black men, indicates they are generally at greater risk of imprisonment than white men. The smaller education coefficients men suggests that the risk of imprisonment is less class-stratified for blacks than white. Both groups experience increasing educational inequality in imprisonment, as college graduates of all races were largely shielded from the increase in incarceration risks associated with the prison boom.

Table 5 reports estimates of the effects of earnings and employment on prison admission among young black and white and men. Column (1) of Table 5 shows the earnings and employment effects in a model controlling for violent crime and year-race-age fixed effects. With these fixed effects only variation in admission rates across levels of education contributes to the estimates. In this model, a hundred dollar increase in average weekly earnings—roughly the earnings gap between dropouts and high school graduates—is estimated to halve the risk of prison admission. A ten percent gap in employment rates—roughly equal to the dropout-graduate employment gap among whites—is associated with a 40 percent reduction in the risk of imprisonment.

An alternative model fits fixed effects to every education-race-age cell. This specification is similar to fixed effects effects models for panel data (Hsiao 1985, ch. 3) in which only longitudinal variation contributes to the

analysis. In this model, only the earnings effect is significant. The estimates indicates that a one hundred dollar increase in weekly earnings between 1983 and 1999 was associated with a 30 percent reduction in the risk of imprisonment. The earnings of black high school graduates declined by about fifteen dollars between 1983 to 1999, increasing the risk of prison admission by an estimated 5 percent.

The regression analysis can be extended by studying how the effects of employment and earnings on imprisonment might differ for blacks and whites, and over time (Table 5). A test for racial heterogeneity is motivated by claims that the period of mass incarceration had unusually severe effects on young low-skill black men (Tonry 1995; Duster 1997; Wacquant 2000). Regression analysis for whites indicates that the risk of imprisonment is associated only with earnings, not employment. Because employment among whites is not steeply stratified by education, nearly all the variation in prison admissions is accounted for by variation in earnings. The risk of prison admission among blacks, however, is sensitive to both employment and earnings. This suggests that the growth in incarceration is tied as closely to declining employment among non-college black men through the 1980s and 1990s as it is to the growth in U.S. income inequality. This result is consistent with other research suggesting that the idleness of low-skill black men in poor urban neighborhoods exposes them to greater scrutiny from police and heightens perceptions of dangerousness in the courts (Chambliss 2000; Steffensmeier et al. 1998). The estimated employment effect for black men suggests that the 3 percent decline in employment among black dropouts between 1983 and 1999 was associated with a 4 percent drop in the risk of imprisonment. The fifteen dollar fall in earnings among black high school graduates over the same period is estimated to increase prison admission by a similar amount.

Table 4. Results from regression of men's annual prison admission rates, by age race and education, 1983–1999. (Figures in parentheses are t statistics.)

	All (1)	All (2)	Whites (3)	Blacks (4)
Intercept	.06 (.76)	.51 (2.35)	.34 (1.20)	1.70 (3.86)
High School	-1.70 (44.67)	-1.65 (23.44)	-1.74 (20.13)	-1.59 (13.41)
College	-3.41 (89.10)	-3.10 (42.91)	-3.49 (41.91)	-2.75 (28.17)
Violent Crime	.04 (1.73)	-.14 (1.88)	-.01 (.14)	.01 (.07)
Black	1.89 (54.47)	1.93 (23.59)	—	—
Year	.05 (13.25)	.00 (.00)	.06 (1.96)	.05 (1.16)
Year×High School	—	-.01 (.69)	.00 (.40)	-.01 (.93)
Year×College	—	-.04 (4.70)	-.03 (3.74)	-.04 (4.03)
Year×Violent Crime	—	.02 (2.48)	.00 (.12)	.01 (.42)
Year×Black	—	.00 (.02)	—	—
R^2	.97	.97	.98	.96

Note: High school indicates high school graduation or equivalency, college indicates at least some college. Sample size for all men is 408; sample size for whites and blacks is 204. Regressions also control for the linear effect of age.

Table 5. Results from fixed effects regressions of men's annual prison admission rates on earnings and employment, 1983–1999. (Figures in parentheses are t statistics.)

	All (1)	All (2)	Whites (3)	Blacks (4)
Intercept	5.11 (6.33)	2.04 (4.38)	-.36 (.49)	3.52 (7.90)
Earnings (\$100s)	-.77 (9.84)	-.34 (5.64)	-.47 (5.39)	-.28 (3.45)
Employment (10%s)	-.48 (6.25)	-.02 (.52)	.36 (4.52)	-.12 (1.86)
Violent Crime	-.07 (.41)	.10 (3.68)	.10 (3.00)	.08 (2.04)
<i>Fixed Effects</i>				
Year×Race×Age	Yes	No	No	No
Education×Race×Age	No	Yes	No	No
Education×Age	No	No	Yes	Yes
R^2	.76	.98	.99	.95
Parameters.	139	27	15	15

How might trends in prison admission be changed if inequality in earnings and employment had not increased? We address this question by comparing predicted levels of prison admissions for the period 1995 to 1999 under two scenarios. In the first, we predict admissions using the observed levels of employment and earnings. In the second, we fix employment and earnings at the average level for the 1983 to 1987 period. To predict prison admissions under our two scenarios we use estimates from the fixed effects models (3) and (4), for whites and blacks, in Table 5. Because earnings and employment inequality increased from the 1980s to the 1990s, and earnings and employment deteriorated for low-skill men, we expect that imprisonment rates would be significantly lower in 1980s labor market conditions persisted through the 1990s.

The observed levels of employment and earnings reproduce the observed patterns of educational and racial inequality in imprisonment. Among blacks and whites, high school dropouts are more than 10 times as likely to go to prison than men with some college education. Black men are 7 to 8 times more likely to go the prison than white men. If earnings and employment were fixed at their 1980s level, the estimates indicate that prison admission rates would be between 10 and 20 percent lower by the late 1990s. The estimated reduction in admission rates is largest among low-education whites. These results are driven largely by the decline in real earnings among non-college white men. If weekly earnings among young white high school dropouts had retained their value, prison admission rates by the end of the 1990s are estimated to be 23 percent than the observed levels. The effects of wage and employment trends are estimated to be smaller non-college black men. If earnings and employment levels for young black dropouts remained at 1980s levels through the 1990s, the model estimates indicate that prison admission

Table 6. Predicted average prison admission rates (percent) for men, aged 20–39, given observed and 1983–1987 levels of earnings and employment, 1995–1999.

	Employment and Earnings		
	Observed (1)	1983–87 (2)	Ratio (S.E.) (1)–(2)
<i>Whites</i>			
Less than H.S.	2.86	2.19	.77 (.06)
High School or GED	.47	.36	.76 (.07)
Some College	.06	.05	.88 (.02)
<i>Blacks</i>			
Less than H.S.	13.27	11.47	.86 (.06)
High School or GED	2.48	2.11	.85 (.07)
Some College	.65	.55	.85 (.12)

Note: All predictions are based on model (3) and (4) from Table 5. Standard errors for the ratio of differences are calculated with simulation from the posterior predictive distribution.

rates would have fallen from their observed level of 13.3 to 11.5 percent. The change in admission rates is estimated to be nearly identical for black high school graduates.

DISCUSSION

A large research literature claims that high levels of economic inequality intensify criminal justice punishment. In some accounts, the rising poverty that accompanies growing inequality raises crime rates and, ultimately, the scale of imprisonment. An alternative theory links the growing income gap to increasing anxiety among the rich about threats to social order posed by the poor. A punitive trend in criminal justice policy results and those at the bottom of the social ladder are drawn into the penal system as a consequence. Despite these claims, empirical research unevenly supported a link between economic inequality and imprisonment. We trace weak empirical support for the inequality hypothesis to weaknesses in research design. Although theory expects rising economic disadvantage among low-education men to increase imprisonment rates, previous research focused on the association between aggregate inequality statistics and incarceration rates.

Our analysis presented a disaggregated analysis in which the earnings and employment of men at different ages, races, and levels of education were linked to their risk of imprisonment. These detailed admission rates showed that incarceration had become extremely common at the end of the 1990s among men with little schooling. About 16 percent of black male dropouts, aged 20 to 40, were estimated to enter prison each year by 1999. Regression analysis of detailed admission rates found that imprisonment risks shifted across levels of education, not across age or race groups. Most of the growth in the risks of incarceration were concentrated among men, particularly black

men, with less than college education. These men suffered the largest losses in earnings and employment and experienced the largest growth in imprisonment rates. We thus found that weekly earnings and employment rates were strongly negatively related to prison admission for young black men. The empirical analysis suggests that if levels of economic inequality that were observed in the mid-1980s prevailed through the 1990s, prison admission rates among non-college black and white men would be reduced by between 10 and 20 percent.

Was the growth in incarceration due chiefly to changes in the criminal justice regime, or to increasing crime among low-education men? Supporting the social control account of imprisonment, these results were robust to fixed effects and victimization rates intended to control for variation in criminality across the population. The economic effects were largely unchanged by the inclusion of these crime effects. Of course, crime rates may vary across levels of education in ways not captured by our models. Still, the race and year effects also tap social control processes that are correlated with earnings and employment. Social control efforts fluctuate with cyclical shifts in unemployment (Chiricos and Delone 1982) and criminal sentencing increasingly resorted to imprisonment as real wages fell through the 1980s and 1990s. African Americans are at relatively high risk of incarceration even controlling for criminal offending (Blumstein 1993). Over-estimates of the social-control component of economic effects are offset to some degree by biases in the model for crime in the population. Given these offsetting biases, social control efforts thus seem the likely source for the economic effects.

Controlling for crime across levels of education, also helps counter the concern that these results reflect the changing effects of selection as educational attainment increases. With increased levels of schooling in the population,

dropouts in the late 1990s may be more crime prone than dropouts in early 1980s. If changes in selectivity contributes to educational inequality in imprisonment we would also expect to observe increasing imprisonment rates among the college-educated who account for a larger proportion of the population in the late 1990s than the early 1980s. There is no evidence for this effect, however. Indeed a striking feature of the prison admission trends is the stability of imprisonment rates among the college-educated.

Finally, this analysis has shown that rising economic inequality is not only associated with higher rates of imprisonment, it is also associated with increasing inequality in imprisonment. The growth in economic inequality was accompanied by the emergence of two kinds of collective experience: one among college-educated whites who were largely unaffected by the prison boom, the other among non-college blacks, for whom imprisonment became a common life event. Because the official status of criminality imparted by a prison record affects a variety of life chances and citizenship rights, and imprisonment is increasingly concentrated at the margins of economic life, the prison boom reinforces lines of social disadvantage. More than just a social control institution, the prison contributes to the formation of low-education black men as a discrete social group, with a distinctive life experience that is different from the mainstream. From this perspective, the progressive normalization of incarceration among poor black men represents an expansion, rather than just a by-product, of the new American inequality.

APPENDIX: CONSTRUCTING THE DATA.

Prison Admission Rates The prison admission rate is defined as the number of people annually entering the custody of state or federal prison as a percentage of the noninstitutional civilian and military population. Annual Age-race-education cell proportions were calculated from the NCRP. These cell proportions were then multiplied by aggregate counts of male admissions obtained from the National Prisoner Statistics Series (NPS-1) of the Bureau of Justice Statistics. The NCRP data yield similar age-race distributions to the Survey of Inmates of State and Federal Correctional Facilities. However, levels of schooling in the NCRP tended to be lower than in the inmate survey. The denominator of the admission rate—the population at risk of going to prison—was calculated from the Outgoing Rotation Groups files of the CPS, and counts of military personnel obtained from the Department of Defense.

Earnings Earnings is measured annually by the median weekly earnings of each age-race-education cell for all male workers, deflated by the CPI-U. Earnings are earnings-weighted figures from the Outgoing Rotation Group files of the CPS. Additional analysis examined earnings for full-time full-year workers, and measures of earnings relative to different percentiles of the earnings distribution, but these alternative specifications yield results identical to those reported in the paper.

Employment Employment is measured by the employment to population ratio of each age-race-education cell for the male noninstitutional and civilian and military population. Employment rates are calculated from survey-weighted data in the Outgoing Rotation Group files of the CPS and counts of military personnel from the Department of Defense.

Violent Crime Violent crime is measured by the total number of personal crimes suffered as a proportion of the civilian noninstitutional population. The number of criminal victimizations is given by the incident-based files of National Crime Victimization Survey (1983–1999). Victimization are calculated separately for blacks and whites, aged 20–50, at different levels of education. Denominators for the victimization rates were taken from the Outgoing Rotation Groups files of the CPS.

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