The Causes, Consequences, and Future of Mass Incarceration in the United States
Final Project Report
2015-2018

Overview
The rise of mass incarceration in the U.S. is one of the most important social, political, and economic developments of the last four decades. As members of a three-year collaborative project, our goal was to combine our multi-disciplinary perspectives to advance research on the causes, consequences, and future of mass incarceration in the United States.

Our particular focus was on the causes of mass incarceration, the factors that shape the risk and severity of criminal justice contacts (ranging from brief police stops through the sentencing stage for serious offenses), and how the consequences of criminal justice contact vary across individuals, institutions, and time. This project helped generate three books, dozens of research articles, and more than half-a-million dollars in grant funding.

Books published by Mass Incarceration Project Members
In addition to conducting research, the project engaged with the broader community. Project affiliates represent 19 different Cornell departments and four community groups. The project supported a variety of public events including Educate the Vote, which featured criminal justice experts Vesla Weaver and Marc Levin, and a keynote talk by Dorothy Roberts. Videos of several events are available in the multimedia archive.

Our project will culminate on October 4, 2018, when James Forman, Jr. gives the inaugural Center for the Study of Inequality Criminal Justice Lecture.

Research and Findings
Three years of research yielded multiple books, dozens of peer-reviewed journal articles, and numerous op-eds. Among the many findings, two particularly important conclusions stand out in our team’s research: politics matters and incarceration has major effects on families.

Politics Matter: The role political decisions played in the rise of mass incarceration is especially evident in Enns’ Incarceration Nation: How the United States Became the Most Punitive Democracy in the World and in Kohler-Hausmann’s Getting Tough: Welfare and Imprisonment in 1970s America. Together these two books combine to show how increasingly punitive attitudes influenced the criminal justice system during the 1960s, 70s, 80s, and 90s and how the unprecedented growth of the penal system and the evisceration of the nation’s welfare programs developed hand in hand. The political focus of these two books also holds critical implications for undoing the U.S. carceral state.


Incarceration Has Major Effects on Families: The project has also highlighted the many critical ways that incarceration influences families. Wildeman, Haskins, and Pohlmann-Tynan published the edited volume When Parents Are Incarcerated: Interdisciplinary Research and Interventions to Support Children, which offers an authoritative, multidisciplinary analysis of how parental incarceration affects children and what can be done to help them. Haskins, Amorim, and Mingo (2018) also produced a comprehensive overview of research on the topic in “Parental Incarceration and Child Outcomes: Those at Risk, Evidence of Impacts, Methodological Insights, and Areas of Future Work.”

Other research on the topic explores the intersection of parental incarceration and children’s educational experiences. For example, “Schools as Surveilling Institutions? Paternal Incarceration, System Avoidance and Parental Involvement in Schooling” (Haskins and Jacobsen 2017) and “Beyond Boys’ Bad Behavior: Paternal Incarceration and Cognitive Development into Middle Childhood” (Haskins 2016) document how parental incarceration can impact the schooling experience of the approximately two million children with a parent incarcerated in the United States.
The project bibliography provides a list of related publications by project fellows. For additional information, see a list of sub-projects pursued over the course of the project and media coverage of the project’s research and events.

**Ongoing Collaborative Research**

Project members will continue the above research with two ongoing collaborative research projects. The first project began in 2018 with a $450,000 grant from FWD.US to support research to understand the level and extent to which incarceration affects families. Chris Wildeman is the Principal Investigator on the grant with Enns, Fitzpatrick, and Haskins as co-investigators. In addition to producing the first estimates of family-level contact with prisons and jails (at the national-level, state-level, and by demographic group), this research will consider criminal justice contact beyond incarceration, current as well as historical family incarceration, and types or levels of family incarceration. The findings will further be broken down by demographic group, including race, gender, and family income, and may include sub-estimates for municipalities. The data will provide a much more nuanced and detailed understanding of how incarceration impacts American society.

In a second ongoing collaborative project, Wildeman and Fitzpatrick, along with Alyssa Goldman, a graduate student in sociology, are using data from the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections to see how general educational programs available to prisoners moderate the consequences of incarceration. This research has also received funding from the Russell Sage Foundation to create a linked administrative dataset of children in New York City with paternal or maternal incarceration. The new link will provide more accurate causal estimates of the effects of parental incarceration on children than the surveys previously used which suffered from high attrition rates.

**Legacy**

The team has scheduled a campus-wide and public event for October 4, 2018, which will feature James Forman, Jr., who recently won a Pulitzer Prize for *Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America*. Professor Forman’s talk will represent the capstone event for this theme project. The talk will also be the inaugural talk in an annual lecture series on the criminal justice system. This lecture series represents an important legacy of the project, ensuring that the interdisciplinary research and attention to criminal justice will continue into the future. The criminal justice lecture series will be co-sponsored with Cornell’s Center for the Study of Inequality.