



September 2006, Issue 31

Early Incarceration Spells and the Transition to Adulthood

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Today, 2.1 million men and women are serving time, largely in federal or state prisons, and approximately 5% of the adult male population is in or has been in prison. Young men in their early twenties are especially likely to have served time. Their risk of imprisonment has tripled between 1979 and 2001.¹ For all racial and ethnic groups, less-educated men are considerably more likely to be incarcerated than more educated men. However, less-educated black men have the highest incarceration rates. The author calculates, using California prison data, that 90% of black male high school dropouts now aged 45 to 54 have been or are in jail. In other words, for this group, it is a near certainty that they will have experienced some prison time by middle age. Other studies using national data find similar, albeit lower probabilities.²

Couple these high incarceration rates with extremely high rates of re-offending after release, and the imprint of prison on one's life chances can be profound. While research clearly shows that a prison record hinders employment prospects, fewer studies have examined how prison affects other aspects of life. Steven Raphael, in his chapter in *The Price of Independence*, examines whether a prison record affects several key markers of the transition to adulthood: independent living, marriage, employment, and earnings.³

Recent Incarceration Trends

The portion of the U.S. population that has ever been incarcerated has risen sharply since the 1970s, particularly among young men. The proportion of men who have experienced incarceration has more than doubled, from 2.3% in 1974 to 4.9% in 2001.⁴ For whites, the likelihood of imprisonment increased from 2.2% among those born in 1974 to 5.9% for those born in 2001. For Hispanics, the risk increased from 4% to 17.2%. For black males, the risk increased from 13.2% to 32.2%.

Effects of Incarceration on Transition to Adulthood

Raphael finds that young men who serve time lag behind those who do not on traditional markers of adulthood. Figures 1-4 detail these trends among men aged 18-32 who were and were not in jail during at least one interview for the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth between 1979 and 1996.⁵ On all four markers of adulthood—earnings, employment, marriage, and living independently—those with a prison record fared more poorly than those without.

1 Thomas Bonczar, "Prevalence of Imprisonment in the U.S. Population, 1974-2001." BJS Special Report, NCJ 197976. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003.

2 Becky Pettit and Bruce Western, "Mass Imprisonment and the Life Course: Race and Class Inequality in U.S. Incarceration," *American Sociological Review*, 69 (2004): 151-169.

3 Sheldon Danziger and Cecilia Rouse, editors, *The Price of Independence: The Economics of Early Adulthood* (Russell Sage Foundation, under review). Danziger and Rouse are members of the MacArthur Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood. For additional Network books on the transition to adulthood, see www.transad.pop.upenn.edu.

4 Bonczar, note 1 above.

5 Those participating in the NLSY were interviewed from 1979 to the present.

However, these differences could be because of personal or larger economic factors other than prison sentences. Therefore, Raphael controls for a host of personal and developmental conditions, and also compares these markers with those who do not serve time but who are also at high risk for prison. Differences in observable traits such as education, experience, race, and ethnicity among other factors explain the lion's share of the hourly earnings differential and the difference in the likelihood of living with one's parents. However, ex-offenders work 6 to 10 fewer weeks per year relative to those who have not been to prison, even after controlling for a host of factors. Moreover, those who have been to prison are 6 to 14 percentage points less likely to have ever married, again controlling for observable characteristics.

Policy Implications: In-Prison Workforce Development Programs Needed

It is perhaps no surprise that ex-inmates are delayed in their transitions to adulthood. While others are accumulating work experience (and the rising earnings that go with it), those who are incarcerated are not. Further, some jobs are explicitly banned for convicted felons, and employers are often reluctant to hire those with a criminal record. Serving time may also engender antisocial attitudes and inhibit emotional development. Working less and earning less makes it difficult to afford housing, which might increase the person's reliance on parents. Both employment and housing can problems also make them less desirable marriage partners.

Although reducing incarceration rates would be one route to addressing the issues raised here, for a variety of reasons, this is unlikely to happen. A more realistic option would be to institute strong workforce development and substance abuse programs in prisons (given that a key reason for the record incarceration rates are increased drug-related arrests). As a recent MDRC study reports, there are only a few experimental studies on the effects of in-prison services, but many experts believe that the most promising reentry models provide coordinated services both before and after inmates are released.⁶ Some states are already exploring these avenues. Illinois, for example, is currently revamping its corrections system to focus on reentry from the first day in prison, with a strong focus on enhancing workforce skills and reducing substance use and other barriers to reentry. The program also continues to support the former prisoner for a transitional period after release.

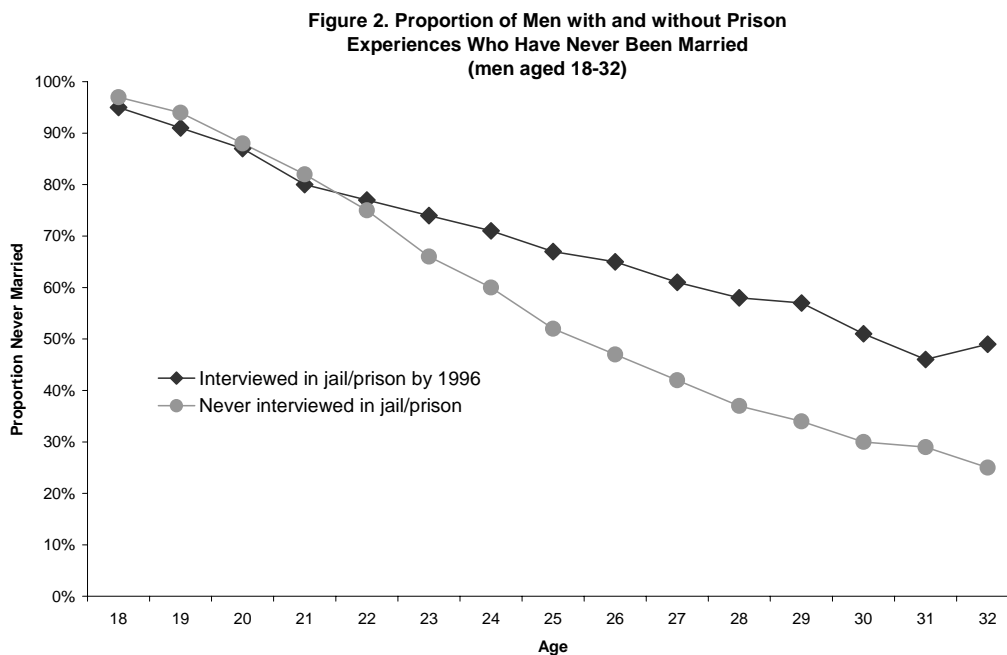
As prison populations remain high, more and more men will struggle to become productive adults. With nearly 5% of men having served time—and significantly more minority men—this issue can no longer be ignored. Without attending to the needs of these young men, a sizable portion of our nation's youth will continue to lag behind on the events that are essential to productive adulthood.

Based on Steven Raphael, "Early Incarceration Spells and the Transition to Adulthood," in The Price of Independence: The Economics of Early Adulthood, edited by Sheldon Danziger and Cecilia Rouse (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, under review).

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⁶ Dan Bloom, *Employment-Focused Programs for Ex-Prisoners* (New York: MDRC, 2006).

Network on Transitions to Adulthood



The Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy examines the changing nature of early adulthood, and the policies, programs, and institutions that support young people as they move into adulthood. Significant cultural, economic, and demographic changes have occurred in the span of a few generations, and these changes are challenging youth's psychological and social development. Some are adapting well, but many others are floundering as they prepare to leave home, finish school, find jobs, and start families. The network is both documenting these cultural and social shifts, and exploring how families, government, and social institutions are shaping the course of young adults' development. The Network is funded by the MacArthur Foundation and chaired by University of Pennsylvania sociologist Frank Furstenberg.

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Figure 3. Proportion of Men with and without Prison Experiences by Annual Weeks Worked (men aged 18-32)

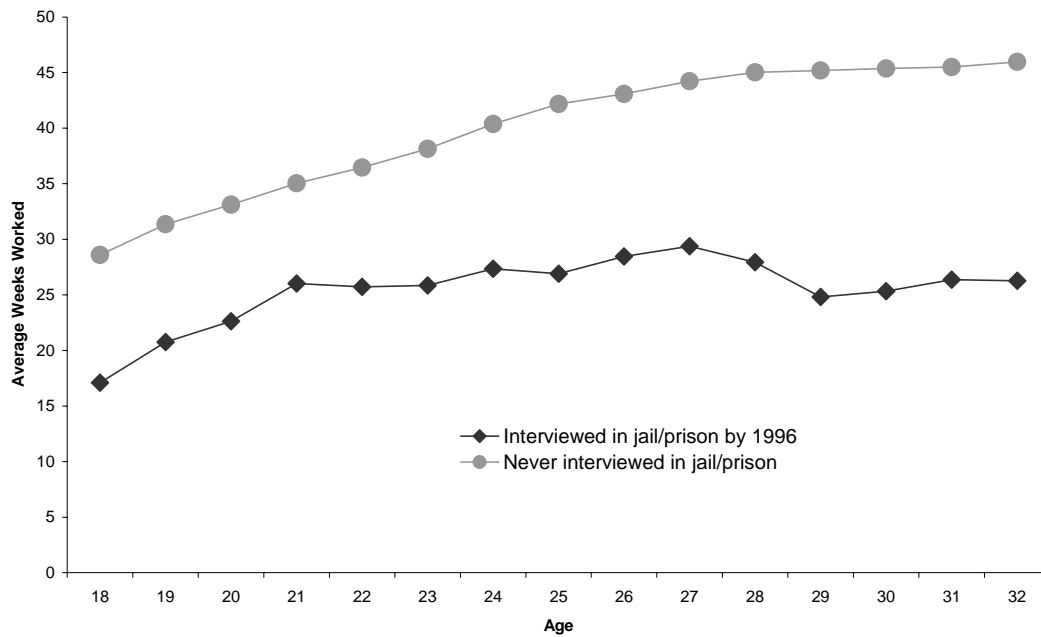
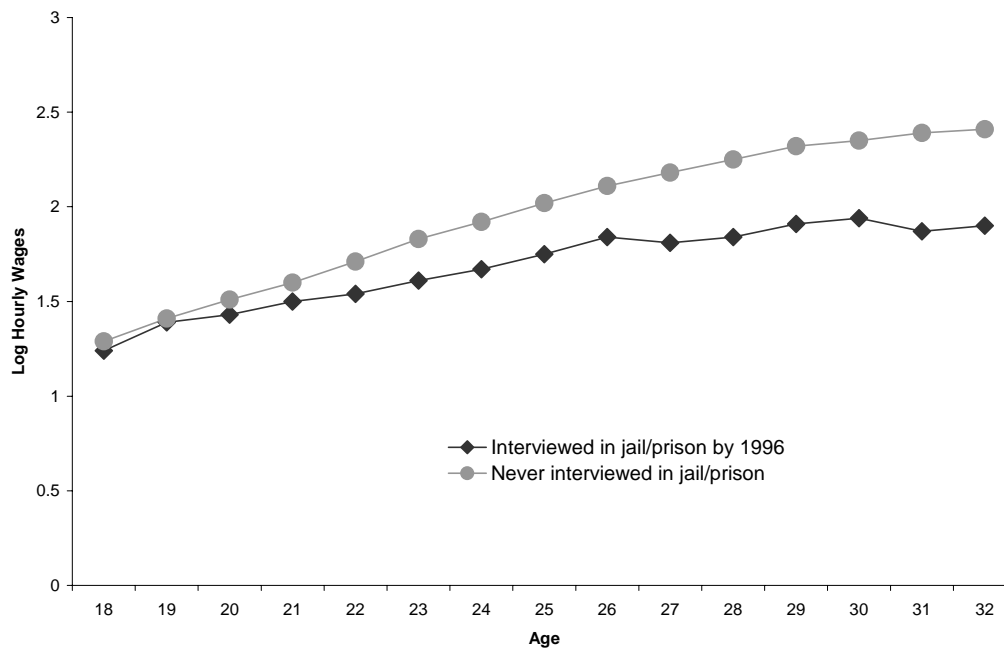


Figure 4. Proportion of Men with and without Prison Experiences by Average Log Hourly Wages (men aged 18-32)



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