Incarceration of African American Men and the Impact on Women and Children

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Abstract

This paper investigates how the high incarceration rate of African American men in the United States affects women’s marriage, fertility, and labor market outcomes, as well as children’s living environment and long-run education outcomes. I exploit plausibly exogenous changes in state and federal sentencing policies to estimate the causal impact of male incarceration. Using offender-level data on all prisoners admitted to and released from prison between 1986 and 2009, I construct a simulated instrumental variable, which reflects sentencing policy changes that drove incarceration growth through enhanced likelihood to be sentenced to prison per arrestee and increased length of time served in prison. I find that 1% increase in the fraction of black men in prison increases the likelihood of being never married by 3 percentage points for black women without or with some college education and increases the likelihood of being employed by 3 percentage points for black women with at least some college education. For black children, 1% increase in the fraction of black men in prison increases the likelihood of being born out of wedlock by 4.4 percentage points, increases the likelihood of living with mother only by 3.5 percentage points, and decreases the likelihood of having at least some college education by 2 percentage points in the long run.