Working Nine to Nine: How Paternal Incarceration Undermines Maternal Economic Stability

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Abstract

Roughly half of men incarcerated across the United States are fathers to children under 18. For many mothers left behind, finding steady work is nonnegotiable, and yet there is very little empirical research on the impact of paternal incarceration on mothers' labor market outcomes. We exploit data from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS) and instrument for paternal incarceration, using a two-stage least squares framework, to measure a variety of maternal employment outcomes. Our findings suggest that mothers with co-parents who are impacted by the criminal legal system are disadvantaged in profound and compounding ways. Mothers with co-parents who are either currently or formerly incarcerated experience diminished weekly labor force participation. For mothers with currently incarcerated co-parents, the reduction in hours worked also results in substantially lower weekly wages. We build on prior research that shows how incarceration reduces a person's earnings, both while they are behind bars and in the longer term, which often leads to significant and long-term debt. Our findings demonstrate how mothers in particular are forced to compensate for losses in their co-parents' contributions to household income as they endure the financial burden of criminal legal system debt. Ultimately, our study suggests that we may be underestimating the role of the criminal legal system in structuring inequality generally, and in the labor market specifically. This issue is worthy of further study and concerted policy intervention. Absent meaningful government intervention, this form of subjugation will continue.

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Introduction

Mothers occupy a unique role in the household; it is essential, diffuse, and largely unseen. Mothers, regardless of marital status, spend roughly double the amount of time providing childcare and performing housework than fathers do each week (Gender Equity Policy Institute 2024). This amounts to 12.0 hours taking care of children and 15.2 hours doing chores each week, compared to fathers, who spend 6.7 hours and 6.2 hours respectively on the same activities. And although 74 percent of mothers with children under 18 are in the labor force (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2024), they are nonetheless disproportionately responsible for the instrumental support (Comfort 2016, Cross et al. 2018, Taylor, Chatters, and Cross 2021, Western 2018, Wildeman and Lee 2021) and emotional labor (Cross et al. 2018, Erickson 2005, Perry 2017, Wellman and Wortley 1990) required to keep families afloat. This is particularly true during stressful life events (Thoits 2011).

This study interrogates the lasting impacts of one particularly stressful life event: the incarceration of a co-parent. Extant research demonstrates the impacts of paternal incarceration on nearly all domains of a mother's life, including interpersonal relationships, mental and physical health, and economic stability. Romantic relationships impacted by paternal incarceration are more likely to break down (Nurse 2002, Turney and Wildeman 2013) and end in separation or divorce (Apel and Sweeten 2010, Lopoo and Western 2005, Massoglia, Remster, and King 2011, Siennick et al. 2014). Mothers are also more likely to suffer from a wide range of mental and physical health complications, including depression, heart attack, and stroke (Wildeman, Schnittker, and Turney 2012). And lastly, when fathers are locked away, households often lose their primary source of income (Bruns 2020, Chung 2012, Schwartz-Soicher, Geller, and Garfinkel 2011). These financial repercussions endure, as formerly incarcerated people face substantial barriers to securing employment (Pager 2003, Holzer et al. 2004), and those who find work earn substantially less than their peers (Craigie et al., 2020).

For most mothers with an incarcerated co-parent, finding steady work is nonnegotiable, and yet there is very little empirical research on the impact of paternal incarceration on their labor market outcomes. Prior descriptive studies have shown that mothers are more likely to hold multiple jobs while fathers are behind bars (Bruns 2017, Bruns 2019). Separate studies have found that not only are mothers more likely to be unemployed, but those who have jobs earn significantly less while their child's father is incarcerated, sometimes resorting to informal or illegal employment (Bruns 2017, 2019, Cox 2012, deVuono-Powell et al. 2015). A more recent study found that male partner incarceration lowers mothers' weekly earnings at both the intensive and extensive margins, and increases the likelihood of unemployment at the extensive margin (Craigie 2020).

The current study further develops extant research in a few ways. First, there are few causal studies in this area, which may be due to the lack of readily available data and the methodological challenge of isolating the effect of paternal incarceration. Craigie 2020 is an important exception, and we draw heavily from her study. Second, we limit our focus to co-parent incarceration, as opposed to male partner incarceration—perhaps with a boyfriend who is not a biological father. This choice is deliberate. Given that the incarceration of a co-parent often leads to family restructuring (i.e., separation, divorce, repartnering), the current study focuses on whether the incarceration of her child's father in particular impacts a mother's labor market outcomes, even if he is no longer

part of her family in the traditional sense. Lastly, we adopt multiple definitions of incarceration in order to distinguish between situations where a mother's male co-parent is currently incarcerated from situations where a mother's male co-parent was formerly incarcerated but has since been released. Ideally, our models would have incorporated the duration of incarceration for each of these scenarios, however while the original dataset included duration, excessive missingness prevented us from including the variable in our models. Among the families who reported duration of incarceration, some men were incarcerated for only one month or less, sometimes when they were as young as 17 years old.

We exploit data from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS) and employ a two-stage least squares framework to measure the impact of co-parent incarceration on maternal employment outcomes. Our findings suggest that mothers with co-parents who are impacted by the criminal legal system are disadvantaged in profound and compounding ways. In particular, mothers with co-parents who are either currently or formerly incarcerated experience diminished labor force participation. For mothers with currently incarcerated co-parents, the reduction in weekly hours worked also results in substantially lower wages earned.

We build on prior research that shows how incarceration reduces a person's earnings, both while they are behind bars and in the longer term, which can lead to significant and long-term debt. Our findings demonstrate how mothers in particular are forced to compensate for losses in their co-parents' contributions to household income as they endure the financial burden of criminal legal system debt. Together, our results highlight the enduring and multifaceted effects of paternal incarceration.

As roughly half of men incarcerated across the United States are fathers to children under 18 (Maruschak, Bronson, and Alper 2021), this problem is widespread. Because those in prison and jail are overwhelmingly male, and disproportionately men of color, women of color typically shoulder the burden of providing instrumental, economic, and emotional support to family members in the community (Carson 2022, Zeng and Minton 2021). Ultimately, our study suggests that we are underestimating the role of the criminal legal system in structuring inequality generally, and in the labor market specifically. This issue is worthy of further study and concerted policy intervention. Absent meaningful government intervention, this form of subjugation will continue.

Background

The "Triple Burden"

Working mothers experience an acute tension between earning money and providing childcare. Even for women with resources, spending more time with family means spending less time pursuing a career (Bianchi 2011, Blair-Loy, 2003, Bruns 2019). Ultimately, however, affluent women have choices. Their financial resources allow them to stay home with their child and forego employment altogether. Or, they might choose to pay for childcare and domestic labor in order to return to work. In other words, for affluent mothers, work itself is a choice. Poor women on the other hand do not have the option to stay home. For them, the tension between

working and mothering is far more urgent. They must earn enough to support their families while also performing household labor and the myriad, underappreciated duties of motherhood (Bianchi 2011, Bruns 2019). The tension between work and parenthood is more acute for minoritized women, and Black women in particular, who not only contend with the interrelated structural disadvantages of sexism and economic injustice, but also those of racism. These dynamics are sometimes referred to as the "triple burden" (Griffin 2017).

Impacts of Paternal Incarceration on Mothers

The women in our study shoulder a fourth burden: the fathers of their children were (or still are) incarcerated. This reality can alter mothers' caregiving responsibilities and change their social and economic conditions in substantial and pervasive ways (e.g., Arditti et al. 2003, Bruns 2019, Comfort 2008, deVuono-powell et al. 2015, Geller et al. 2011). There is a considerable body of research demonstrating how the incarceration of a partner has profound impacts on nearly all domains of a mother's life, including family dynamics, child rearing, mental health, physical health, and economic stability.

Unsurprisingly, paternal incarceration has a deep negative impact on mothers' interpersonal relationships. Romantic relationships impacted by paternal incarceration are more likely to break down (Nurse 2002, Turney and Wildeman 2013) and end in separation or divorce (Apel and Sweeten 2010, Lopoo and Western 2005, Massoglia, Remster, and King 2011, Siennick et al. 2014). A multitude of qualitative and quantitative studies have found that the incarceration of family members diminishes relationship quality, increases relationship strain, and leads to family conflict (Comfort 2016; Turanovic et al. 2016; Turney and Halpern-Meekin 2020), especially for low-income and minoritized people, who often take on additional roles supporting their family financially and emotionally (Cherlin and Furstenberg 1986, Fuller-Thomson, Minkler, and Driver 1997). Within families, women are disproportionately responsible for providing instrumental assistance tasks and performing emotional labor, particularly during stressful life events, making it more likely that they will be saddled with the costs of "caregiving" for their community when a loved one is incarcerated (Comfort 2016, Cross et al. 2018, Taylor, Chatters, and Cross 2021, Western 2018, Wildeman and Lee 2021, Perry 2017, Wellman and Wortley 1990, Kessler and McLeod 1984:629, Massoglia, Remster, and King 2011).
Paternal incarceration presents an additional stressor to the mother in the form of a greater child-rearing burden. Evidence suggests that parental incarceration events may be more harmful to children than other forms of parent-child separation, such as divorce (Solomon and Zweig 2006; Sroufe 1988). As children's physical and mental health suffer (Geller 2012), they experience behavioral and developmental struggles, displaying more physical aggression and impulsivity, greater participation in substance use, and more frequent contact with school disciplinary systems (Wakefield and Wildeman 2011, Geller et al. 2010, Geller 2012). Although in certain scenarios incarceration may remove men who inflict harm, research finds overwhelmingly negative impacts of paternal incarceration on child well-being, which in turn suggests a greater caretaking burden for mothers (Jaffee et al. 2003).

This added caretaking burden is complicated by paternal incarceration's harmful impacts on mothers' mental and physical health. Those who have experienced the incarceration of a partner display elevated levels of mental illness, obesity, heart attack, and stroke (Braman 2004, Comfort 2008, Wildeman, Schnittker, and Turney 2012, Pearlin and Bierman 2013, and Lee et al. 2014). Researchers have described how these outcomes might be explained by stress proliferation, or the process by which an initial stressful event can engender secondary stressors for the person's loved ones (Smith and Coleman 2024). A 2024 study found that, due to the carceral system's targeting of men, especially Black men, the psychological consequences of familial incarceration fall disproportionately on women, especially Black women (Smith and Coleman 2024).

Finally, incarceration of a co-parent compromises the mothers' economic stability. In many cases, locking up the father removes a family's primary source of income (Bruns 2020, Chung 2012, Schwartz-Soicher, Geller, and Garfinkel 2011, Glaze and Maruschak 2010). Women must then face the daunting, and often impossible task, of compensating for the lost income of a partner, while also covering the in-kind resources—such as childcare and domestic labor—that incarcerated fathers are no longer able to provide (Fishman 1990, Braman 2004). These detrimental impacts to household earnings can extend far beyond the term of paternal incarceration. After release from jail or prison, people face substantial barriers to securing employment (Pager 2003, Holzer et al. 2004). One study estimated that a spell in prison reduced lifetime earnings by 52 percent (Craigie et al., 2020). Furthermore, men impacted by the criminal legal system often fall behind in their child support payments and are less likely to live with their families, resulting in fewer financial contributions to their co-parents and children (Geller, Garfinkel and Western 2011, Haney 2018). Considering how women earn less than men on average, making up for this lost income can be particularly difficult for mothers (Hegewisch and Mefferd 2021).

In addition to reductions in household income, paternal incarceration can saddle mothers with additional economic costs, including payments associated with prison visits, phone calls, commissary, bail, and legal fees. A 2001 survey found that the average monthly cost of visiting, calling, and sending packages to partners was as high as $292, equivalent to roughly $530 in 2025 dollars (Grinstead et al. 2001). A more recent survey found that caring for an incarcerated loved one costs families an average of $4,195 a year (Elderbroom, Mayer, and Rose 2025). The same survey found that in most cases (86 percent), women were responsible for paying these costs, or taking on the associated debt. Notably, one study found that female partners were better off financially after paternal incarceration (Comfort 2008), however those findings appear to be an exception. In general, research has demonstrated paternal incarceration's deleterious effects on the family's overall financial well-being.

The Current Study: Paternal Incarceration and Maternal Employment Outcomes

There is far less research on the employment outcomes of mothers impacted by incarceration of their child's father. Three existing studies use the longitudinal Future of Families and Child Welfare Study (FFCWS) dataset to estimate how paternal incarceration affects associated mothers' employment patterns. Two of these studies (Bruns 2017, Bruns 2019) found that, while having a co-parent behind bars did not affect the number of hours that mothers worked, it did increase the odds of them holding multiple jobs by 54 percent. A more recent study using the same dataset estimated that mothers with incarcerated partners were 20 percent more likely to be

unemployed and earned an average of four percent less than their peers without a partner behind bars (Craigie 2021). The authors estimated that incarceration of a partner reduces the income of women by an average of $1,458 per year, with a higher annual economic burden for Black women, estimated at $2,187. In addition to increasing mothers' likelihood of unemployment and depressing their earnings, paternal incarceration also reduces mothers' networking opportunities and may encourage them to compensate for lost income by pursuing informal or illegal employment (Bruns 2017, 2019, Cox 2012, deVuono-Powell et al. 2015).

We build on extant literature in several ways. First, most existing studies are descriptive, and we employ a two-stage least squares method to instrument for paternal incarceration and isolate its causal impacts. Additionally, studies relying on FFCWS data largely examine the impacts of current or recent incarceration (e.g., Bruns 2017, Bruns 2019, Craigie 2021); however, our analysis defines four categories of paternal incarceration, which in turn yield four sets of models that enable us to disentangle the relative impacts of current and former paternal incarceration on mothers' employment outcomes. This approach is informed by prior research, which finds that any experience with incarceration, no matter the intensity, can result in long-term harm. For example, studies have shown that even one night in jail can negatively impact someone for years, resulting in job loss, housing insecurity, and eroded social ties (Bergin et al. 2022, Carson 2021, Miller et al. 2024).

Lastly, our analysis also accounts for the impact of paternal incarceration within non-traditional family structures. The FFCWS disproportionately sampled unmarried households. Many of the mothers in the study are not currently romantically involved with the father of their children. Some of them may not even be in regular contact with their child's father. Although paternal incarceration's impact on mothers is likely amplified when the father is a member of the household, a current romantic partner, or shares child-rearing responsibilities, we choose to include co-parents in our sample that have seemingly-distant relationships. This decision draws from life-course theory, which emphasizes linked lives; scholars utilizing this framework have emphasized how "even marginal men seemingly disconnected from families" are actually deeply embedded in kinship systems (Turney 2014).

Data and Methods

The mothers in our study, including those whose children did not experience paternal incarceration, face a myriad of challenges. For example, by the time their children were nine years old, nearly one third of mothers had experienced depression, with Black mothers reporting the highest rates of mental health struggles. Among the numerous outcomes we might have studied, we focus on weekly wages and weekly earnings. We prioritize these measures as opposed to others that appear in extant research in order to shed light on an underexplored hypothesis that mass incarceration worsens gender inequality in the labor market by compounding the gendered disadvantage that women face in the workplace as they navigate both the absence of a co-parent in the family and the presence of a co-parent behind bars.

Future of the Families and Child Wellbeing Study

To analyze the economic impacts of fathers' incarceration on mothers, we draw on the Future of the Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS), a stratified, multistage, probability sample of roughly 5,000 children born in large cities in the United States between 1988 and 2000. Families who participated in the study were surveyed when their children were born and again when they turned 1, 3, 5, 9, 15, and 22 years old. The study was originally designed to explore a variety of longitudinal outcomes of families, particularly those having unwed parents. Thus, the survey has an oversampling of non-marital births, and a disproportionate number of low-income families and families of color.

The dataset contains well over 15,000 variables, many of which are wholly unrelated to our research question, making subsetting necessary. The co-authors independently surveyed the FFCWS codebook and each created three sets of variables: treatment, outcome, and control variables. The analysis table represents the union of the co-authors' selections. Ultimately, we modelled two primary outcome measures: weekly hours worked (logged) and weekly wages (logged). To model those outcomes, we constructed three treatment variables: current paternal incarceration (binary), former paternal incarceration (binary), and ever paternal incarceration (binary), which represents the union of current and former incarceration. In addition to modeling the discrete impacts of each of those family circumstances, we also constructed a fourth set of models that incorporated both current and former paternal incarceration as two separate treatment effects.

Descriptive Statistics

There are a total of 4,886 mothers and 4,871 fathers in our data set. On average, mothers were 25 years old and fathers were 28 years old at the time of their child's birth. The majority, or roughly three-quarters of mothers, were not married to their child's father, and 36 percent were cohabitating. On average, mothers reported having two children in their household.

[Table 1]

[Table 2]

Due to the survey's oversampling of unmarried households, communities of color are disproportionately represented in FFCWS data. Nearly half of mothers (48 percent) or 2,326 mothers are Black. Approximately 21 percent (1,030 mothers) of mothers are white non-Hispanic, 27 percent (1,336 mothers) are Hispanic, and four percent (194 mothers) are from other racial-ethnic groups. The demographic breakdown for the fathers is similar: roughly 18 percent (894 fathers) are white non-Hispanic, 28 percent (1,354 fathers) are Hispanic, 49 percent (1,407 fathers) are Black, and 4 percent (216 fathers) are from other racial-ethnic groups. These demographic classifications are relatively crude; we were unable to disaggregate by racial-ethnic groups such as Asian, American Indian or Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander.

[Table 3]

Descriptive statistics highlight the carceral system's disproportionate impacts on Black communities. By the time their child was nine years old, more than half, or 56 percent of Black fathers had experienced incarceration. Hispanic fathers also reported high rates of carceral punishment, with 40 percent having been in jail or prison. In contrast, 29 percent of White fathers and 32 percent of fathers in other racial-ethnic groups had been incarcerated by the time their child reached nine years old. The mothers impacted by incarceration of their child's father follow similar demographic patterns. Roughly 55 percent of Black mothers, 39 percent of Hispanic mothers, 35 percent of White mothers, and 28 percent of mothers in other racial-ethnic groups experienced the incarceration of their child's father during this time.

[Table 4]

Fathers' interactions with the criminal legal system began early in their lives; amongst the fathers who reported this information, their average age at first incarceration was 20 years old.

Several FFCWS variables pertaining to the incarceration of fathers exhibited high levels of missingness. For example, although the survey included several questions regarding the length of time fathers spent in jail or prison, an overwhelming majority (93 percent for mother reports and 96 percent for father reports) of these duration-related observations were missing. Among the surveys with complete duration information, fathers reported an average time served of roughly 18 months. The maximum time served was 120 months, or ten years. In contrast, the binary indicator of historical paternal incarceration was relatively complete at 34 percent missing across the entire sample, and missingness was randomly distributed across the entire data set. Consequently, we selected this binary indicator as the treatment variable in our models.

Construction of Treatment Variables

We define current incarceration (exclusive) as an affirmative response from either the mother or father in each household to the question of whether the child's father is currently in jail or prison *and* a negative response from either mother or father to the question of whether the child's father was ever previously incarcerated, whereas current incarceration (inclusive) includes cases where a child's father experienced incarceration at any point in the past. We define former incarceration as an affirmative response from either mother or father to the question of whether the child's father was ever previously incarcerated *and* a negative response to the question of whether the child's father is currently incarcerated. In addition to measuring the discrete impacts of former incarceration and both categories of current incarceration, we construct two additional sets of models: one measuring the impact of a father *ever* experiencing incarceration, either currently or formerly, and another measuring the distinct and mutually exclusive impacts of current and former incarceration in a single model. It is important to note that our construction of former incarceration captures situations in which a father has been incarcerated in years prior to his child's birth, for example in the juvenile legal system or as a young adult. It also includes instances of incarceration of any duration, including those when a father may have spent only one night in jail. Furthermore, inclusion in the "current and former" group, might represent a series of relatively short prison or

jail stays or one longer sentence which spans more than one data collection point. In other words, our construct of former incarceration includes any type of incarceration, irrespective of duration or recency.

Analytical Approach

One key analytical challenge of this study was accounting for the major differences between people who were arrested and subsequently incarcerated and people who were either arrested but never incarcerated or never came into contact with the criminal legal system at all. Not only do these two groups have substantially different demographic characteristics (Kirk and Wakefield 2018, Pettit and Western 2004), but also those with criminal records experience a range of cumulative structural disadvantages (Kirk and Wakefield 2018, Wakefield and Uggen 2010) related to histories of violence and oppression (Kirk and Wakefield 2018). These dynamics make it difficult to isolate the causal impact of a father's incarceration on a mother's labor market outcomes.

Take the naive OLS equations:

$$\textbf{(1)}\ Y_{ist} = \beta_o + \beta_1 T_{1\,ist} + \beta_2 \chi_{ist} + \tau_t + \gamma_{st} + \mu_{ist}$$

$$\textbf{(2)}\ Y_{ist} = \beta_o + \beta_1 T_{1\,ist} + \beta_2 T_{2\,ist} + \beta_3 \chi_{ist} + \tau_t + \gamma_{st} + \mu_{ist}$$

Yrepresents our outcomes of interest, two distinct measures of mother's labor market outcomes: weekly wages (logged) or weekly hours worked (logged). T_1 represents our treatments of interest: current paternal incarceration (binary), former paternal incarceration (binary), or ever paternal incarceration (binary). χ is a vector of observable characteristics that are likely to influence our outcomes of interest, for instance mother's age, race, and education level. τ is a global time trend, and γ is a more flexible state-level time trend.

Under this framework, β_1 will suffer several threats to validity, namely omitted variable bias, reverse causality, and measurement error. Omitted variable bias could occur if our models fail to incorporate variables that are correlated with both our treatment and outcome variables (e.g., public school quality, local job opportunities, etc.), either due to missingness or author oversight. Reverse causality may bias our estimates if mothers' economic outcomes impact the likelihood of fathers' incarceration. If, for example, mothers' low wages make it more likely that fathers will engage in illegal employment or less likely that fathers will have strong legal representation (Craigie 2020). Lastly, our estimates will suffer from measurement error, if for instance, survey respondents answered questions incorrectly or survey takers recorded responses incorrectly.

To mitigate these threats to validity, we adopt an instrument variable design to measure the effect of father's incarceration on mother's labor market outcomes using a two-stage least squares (2SLS) estimator. A good instrument meets several requirements. It should be uncorrelated with μ_{ist} and affect the outcome measures *only* through the treatment variables. It should be strongly correlated with the treatment variable. And lastly, the instrument should be monotonic (i.e., no defiers).

Paternal Incarceration: Stage 1

To instrument for paternal incarceration we draw on Craigie's method and construct a vector of dummy variables indicating whether or not a father's state of residence implemented specific criminal legal system reforms. Beginning in the 1970s, many US states adopted policies that altered sentencing and release policies by limiting judicial discretion, including, presumptive sentencing, statutory presumptive sentencing, voluntary sentencing, determinate sentencing, "truth in sentencing," and "three strikes" laws. A 2015 study (Harmon) found that certain combinations of reforms significantly impacted prison commitments between 1972 and 2008. To test these earlier findings on the subset of states in our sample, we regress each of our treatment variables (i.e., current paternal incarceration inclusive/exclusive, former paternal incarceration, and ever paternal incarceration) on all sentencing reforms and combinations of interactions between sentencing reforms. Ultimately, we find that the presence of presumptive sentencing, "truth in sentencing", and "three strikes" strikes laws accounts for the greatest variation in our stage 1 outcomes, as well as the interactions between the presence of "truth in sentencing" with voluntary sentencing, presumptive sentencing, and statutory presumptive sentencing.

We believe these instruments are robust for several reasons. First, each of our first-stage OLS models yield a significant F-test (F>10). Additionally, we believe it is reasonable to assume that neither state-level sentencing reforms nor carceral infrastructure spending directly impact mother's labor market outcomes. Lastly, as everyone is subject to these reforms by law, we can also safely assume monotonicity.

$$\textbf{Stage 1: } T_{ist} = \pi_o + Z_{ist}\pi_1 + \chi_{ist}\pi_2 + \tau_t + \gamma_{st} + c_i + \mu_{ist}$$

In addition to a vector of instrumental variables (Z_{ist}), the first-stage model also contains a time trend (τ_t) and random-effect to capture household-level variance.

Imputation

To address the presence of missing data and following other analyses of FFCWS data (e.g., Wildeman 2010), we perform multiple imputation using the mice package in R (m = 100). First, we use our stage 1 models to estimate the likelihood of paternal incarceration for each household in every survey wave. Then, we use all stage-2 variables (independent and dependent) to construct imputation models, which yield estimations for our stage-2 independent variables only.

Maternal Outcomes

We model two maternal employment outcomes: weekly wages earned (logged) and weekly hours worked (logged). Wages are inflation adjusted and converted to 2023 dollars.

$$\textbf{Stage 2: } Y_{ist} = \beta_o + T_{ist}\beta_1 + \chi_{ist}\beta_2 + \tau_t + \gamma_{st} + c_i + \mu_{ist}$$

Because maternal outcomes are likely affected by individual and family characteristics, our models have several demographic and household control variables. Specifically, we control for each mother's race, age, and education level as well as certain aspects of the relationship with her child's father: baseline marital status (binary) and baseline cohabitation status (binary). We also include a global time trend (τ_t), a more flexible state-time trend (γ_{st}), and a random effect (c_i) to capture unit-specific variance.

Paternal Incarceration: Stage 2

Our analysis measures the impact of paternal incarceration on mothers' weekly wages and hours worked. Following several prior studies (e.g., Geller, Jaeger, and Pace 2017; Lewis, Garfinkel, and Gao 2017) we constructed multiple dichotomous variables that capture paternal incarceration: current incarceration (inclusive), current incarceration (exclusive), former incarceration, and "ever" incarceration. In a small number of cases, mothers and fathers responded differently to survey questions pertaining to paternal incarceration; if either parent answered affirmatively, we coded the corresponding variable as such. Although our paternal incarceration variables do not capture duration, by constructing separate variables that reflect different paternal carceral experiences, we do our best to overcome the limitations of the data and capture the impacts of paternal incarceration over time.

Instrumental Variable (IV) Estimation Results

Mothers' Weekly Hours Worked

We leverage our distinct measures of paternal incarceration to construct four models of mothers' weekly hours worked. Model I measures the impact of "ever" incarceration, including cases of paternal incarceration for any length of time, at any age. For example, among the 503 fathers who responded to the survey question, 301 (60 percent) spent one year or less in a correctional facility and 89 (18 percent) spent one month or less in a correctional facility. Those men spent an average of 19 months in an adult correctional facility by the time they were 28 years old. The time they spend behind bars has profound effects on the mothers of their children, who work roughly 3 percent more hours each week than their counterparts whose co-parents never spent time in a correctional facility.

[Table 5]

Model II measures the independent effects of former and current paternal incarceration (exclusive). Relative to mothers whose co-parents were never incarcerated, mothers with currently incarcerated co-parents work roughly 2 percent more hours each week, while mothers with formerly incarcerated parents work roughly 4 percent more. Lastly, model III is an interaction model that captures the relationship between the current paternal incarceration (inclusive) and former incarceration. It reveals that the independent effect of having a formerly incarcerated or currently incarcerated (inclusive) co-parent amounts to working roughly 4 percent or 2 percent (not statistically significant) longer hours each week respectively. The interaction term (β = -.065), though not

significant, reveals that among the subset of mothers with formerly incarcerated co-parents, the impact of having a currently incarcerated co-parent amounts to working roughly 4 percent fewer hours each week.

Mothers' Weekly Wages

Model I indicates—perhaps unsurprisingly, given the additional hours of work they do—that mothers with co-parents who have ever been incarcerated earn roughly 2 percent more each week than their counterparts (not statistically significant). Model II disaggregates the experiences of mothers with currently incarcerated (exclusive) co-parents from those of mothers with formerly incarcerated co-parents. While mothers with formerly incarcerated co-parents earn roughly 5 percent more, mothers with currently incarcerated co-parents actually earn 11 percent less than those with co-parents who have never been incarcerated. The inverse relationship that we observe between wages and current incarceration (exclusive) persists in model III: mothers with currently incarcerated (inclusive) co-parents earn 1 percent (statistically insignificant) less than mothers with co-parents who are unaffected by the criminal legal system. Mothers with formerly incarcerated co-parents, on the other hand, make approximately 8 percent more than mothers with co-parents who have never been incarcerated, which is roughly commensurate with the additional hours of work they perform each week. The interaction term (β = -.520) in this model is both large and negative, implying that having a currently incarcerated co-parent has a substantially negative impact on mothers' wages. More specifically, among the subset of mothers who have a formerly incarcerated co-parent, the impact of having a currently incarcerated co-parent amounts to a reduction in wages of roughly 41 percent.

[Table 6]

Limitations

We rely on data from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS), which takes a narrow definition of "family." The FFCWS survey is centered around biological parenthood and largely disregards relationships with extended family members and other loved ones. As a result, it only includes information on parental, maternal, and romantic partner incarceration. Some scholars have called for the inclusion of variables related to sibling or cousin incarceration in order to research incarceration's harms within broader family and kinship structures (Wildeman and Lee 2021). They argue that such approaches would better capture incarceration's impacts on racial and ethnic minority communities, in which non-nuclear-family household configurations are prevalent (Wildeman and Lee 2021). Therefore, our analysis only captures the harm inflicted by one particular type of network event—the incarceration of a co-parent—and thus fails to capture how incarceration creates harm for broader kinship and family structures.

Survey attrition is another potential issue. Relative to other surveys, FFCWS has unusually high response rates (Geller, Jaeger, and Pace 2017), which boosts confidence in our results. Moreover, nearly all households have responses from either the mother or father in at least one survey wave. Due to the nature of the survey, we are able to leverage responses from both parents. This is an important feature of FFCWS, because if the "least involved" fathers are also the ones most likely to drop out, any analysis based on fathers' responses alone will be

affected by selection bias. Combining both mothers' and fathers' reports of paternal incarceration helps to reduce this bias.

[Table 7]
[Table 8]

Discussion and Conclusion

The US carceral system locks up men, many of whom are fathers, at high rates. This punitiveness takes a massive emotional, physical, and financial toll on mothers, who often take on greater child rearing responsibilities in the absence of their co-parent. Present-day motherhood is already rife with contradictions. Women must balance competing priorities for wage labor and unpaid domestic and childcare responsibilities, and they often do so alone. Nationally, 14.5 million children live in single-mother households (The Annie E. Casey Foundation 2023). Historically, however, the institution of marriage and the idealized nuclear family has historically discouraged women from earning money, and unfortunately, social policy has lagged behind the new reality of dual-income and single-mother households (Albelda et al. 2004). In other words, social policies are neglecting to support mothers, even as they take on large shares of household child rearing and financial responsibilities. High rates of paternal incarceration both create and compound these motherhood challenges, and therefore a more nuanced accounting of the impacts to mothers is crucial for the formulation of public policies that more adequately support mothers and their children.

Our paper makes several important contributions to this research area. First, we employ causal methods to isolate the impact of paternal incarceration on an understudied domain: maternal labor market outcomes. Second, we investigate these consequences across a wide range of family structures, including households in which the mother is neither married to nor cohabitating with their child's father. Finally, our analysis encompasses the full spectrum of incidents of incarceration, including situations where fathers spend as little as one day in jail during their youth, which allows us to disentangle the short term versus long term impacts of incarceration.

We find that experiencing paternal incarceration results in mothers working longer hours. While the FFCWS dataset does not include information on what is driving this trend, it could be the need to compensate for lost earnings in the absence of a household earner or the need to cover additional expenses related to caring for an incarcerated loved one. These impacts change with time. Having a co-parent who was *formerly* incarcerated leads to mothers working harder and experiencing a commensurate increase in wages. But, in the short-term, we observe a particularly concerning trend: having a co-parent who is *currently* incarcerated results in mothers working longer hours but actually experiencing a sharp decline in weekly earnings.

This suggests that mothers may be taking on different types of employment—work that is more precarious and lower paying. This shift may be due to mothers juggling competing responsibilities while their loved one is incarcerated. Caring for someone behind bars requires an immense amount of time, financial resources, and

emotional energy—from long weekday visits to prisons in remote locations, to commissary fees, to anxieties about financial security and the safety of loved ones behind bars. While a co-parent is in jail or prison, mothers often take on additional childcare and household responsibilities. Mothers impacted by the incarceration of a co-parent also exhibit higher rates of anxiety and depression, which can further impede their ability to fulfill commitments of stable, full-time employment (Braman 2004, Comfort 2008, Wildeman, Schnittker, and Turney 2012, Pearlin and Bierman 2013, and Lee et al. 2014).

These mothers continue working harder and longer hours after their co-parent's release from jail or prison, indicating that co-parent incarceration can come with long-term financial consequences. Many household expenses—like rent and utilities—are fixed and remain high even if the number of people in the household has decreased. If the incarceration of their child's father took away a primary wage earner, mothers may be taking on debt to keep their household afloat. Moreover, the release of a co-parent does not always provide immediate financial relief. Between 50 to 90 percent of people leaving jail or prison have debt, including carceral debt; studies show that women disproportionately take on the burden of paying these criminal legal system sanctions (Fines and Fees Justice Center 2025). Having a criminal record also presents enormous barriers to employment, which means that formerly-incarcerated fathers may not be able to easily contribute to household finances.

These reentry dynamics could lead to a redistribution of household roles. Studies show that "marginally-employed" fathers—those who are low income or lack regular employment—tend to contribute in-kind, rather than financial, support to their families (Goldberg 2015; Kane, Nelson, and Edin 2015). Formerly-incarcerated fathers might provide their children with school supplies, clothing, or food, while leaving mothers to pursue formal employment and serve as the primary breadwinner. Since women, on average, make less than men, this arrangement likely still leads to worse economic outcomes for families impacted by incarceration (Pew Research Center 2025).

Taken together, these factors may explain why mothers work more and earn more after their co-parent is released: not only are they making up for lost earnings and taking on additional costs related to reentry, but they also may be the household's most viable option for formal employment.

Our findings also hold racial justice implications. The carceral system imposes variation in family structures that further stratifies racial groups in the United States. By locking up Black fathers at high rates, mass incarceration gave rise to a high number of households headed by single Black mothers and introduced greater family complexity (The Pew Charitable Trusts 2010). In this way, incarceration limits Black communities' ability to freely and optimally "do family," or pursue family life (Arditti 2018). This oppression operates on a continuum. In the context of a hetero-patriarchal system that privileges two-parent households, by fracturing families and increasing rates of single parenting, paternal incarceration creates an additional layer of disadvantage, limiting Black families' access to social, financial, and legal institutions that distribute resources and power.[1] In other

[1] For instance, a study highlighting the anti-Black racism and sexism underlying TANF estimated that disparities in TANF administration are responsible for 15 percent of the Black–White child poverty gap in the US. (Parolin 2021)

words, incarceration bars Black communities from accessing the privileged family structure—and its corresponding benefits.

In the face of government neglect, this oppression will continue. Our paper highlights the need for more empirical research on how incarceration shapes the labor market and family conditions. Most importantly, it illuminates the urgent need for more supportive social programs—ones that better tackle the structural factors underpinning challenges in present-day motherhood.

Table 1: Marriage Status, by Race

mother_race	*marriage_at_baseline*		***Total***
	0	1	
black_non_hispanic	2029	297	2326
	87.2 %	12.8 %	100 %
hispanic	1034	302	1336
	77.4 %	22.6 %	100 %
other	105	89	194
	54.1 %	45.9 %	100 %
white_non_hispanic	533	497	1030
	51.7 %	48.3 %	100 %
Total	3701	1185	4886
	75.7 %	24.3 %	100 %

χ^2=541.271 · df=3 · Cramer's V=0.333 · p=0.000

Table 2: Cohabitation Status, by Race

mother_race	*cohab_at_baseline*		***Total***
	0	1	
black_non_hispanic	1536	790	2326
	66 %	34 %	100 %
hispanic	724	612	1336
	54.2 %	45.8 %	100 %
other	143	51	194
	73.7 %	26.3 %	100 %
white_non_hispanic	706	324	1030
	68.5 %	31.5 %	100 %
Total	3109	1777	4886
	63.6 %	36.4 %	100 %

χ^2=76.513 · df=3 · Cramer's V=0.125 · p=0.000

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics (Full Sample)

Underlying data here: ffcws subset summary stats

Variable	**N = 24,490**[1]
	% or M (SD)
Demographic and Control Variables	
mother_race	
black_non_hispanic	48%
hispanic	27%
other	4.0%
white_non_hispanic	21%
father_race	
black_non_hispanic	49%
hispanic	28%
other	4.4%
white_non_hispanic	18%
c_married_father	
0	71%
1	29%
c_cohabitation_father	
0	76%
1	24%
c_father_edu	

college_or_grad	12%
hs	30%
less_than_hs	30%
some_post_secondary	27%
Outcome Variables	
c_mother_edu	
college_or_grad	12%
hs	28%
less_than_hs	29%
some_post_secondary	31%
c_mother_hh_inc	35,963.8 (41,179.8)
work_last_week	
0	43%
1	57%
weekly_hours_work	35.9 (11.5)
mother_weekly_wages	537.5 (9,127.3)
c_anxiety	
0	96%
1	3.8%
c_depression	
0	87%

1	13%
Treatment Variables	
ever_jail_inclusive	
0	33%
1	67%

[1] observations in entire sample

Table 4: Mothers Impacted by Father Incarceration, by Race

mother_race	*jail_by_wave_9*		***Total***
	0	1	
black_non_hispanic	1041	1285	2326
	44.8 %	55.2 %	100 %
hispanic	818	518	1336
	61.2 %	38.8 %	100 %
other	139	55	194
	71.6 %	28.4 %	100 %
white_non_hispanic	674	356	1030
	65.4 %	34.6 %	100 %
Total	2672	2214	4886
	54.7 %	45.3 %	100 %

χ^2=186.215 · df=3 · Cramer's V=0.195 · p=0.000

Table 5

Mothers' Weekly Hours Worked (IV)

	I:	II:	III:
ever	0.030*		
	(0.013)		
race: Hispanic	-0.025+	-0.025+	-0.026+
	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.014)
race: other	0.003	0.003	0.002
	(0.022)	(0.022)	(0.023)
race: White	-0.114***	-0.114***	-0.114***
	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)
age	0.002**	0.002**	0.002**
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
high school	0.065***	0.064***	0.064***
	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.013)
some post-secondary	0.074***	0.074***	0.074***
	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.013)
college or graduate	0.069***	0.069***	0.069***
	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.019)
marriage status	-0.018	-0.019	-0.019
	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.013)
cohabitation status	0.029**	0.028**	0.028**
	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.010)
currently (exclusive)		0.014	
		(0.032)	
formerly		0.040**	0.043**
		(0.015)	(0.016)
currently (inclusive)			0.021
			(0.047)
currently (inclusive): formerly			-0.065
			(0.109)
Num.Obs.	21652	21652	21652
Num.Imp.	100	100	100

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table 6

Mothers' Weekly Wages (IV)

	I:	II:	III:
ever	0.018		
	(0.019)		
race: Hispanic	-0.092***	-0.095***	-0.095***
	(0.021)	(0.021)	(0.021)
race: other	0.051	0.049	0.048
	(0.038)	(0.038)	(0.038)
race: White	0.007	0.004	0.005
	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.019)
age	0.008***	0.008***	0.008***
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
high school	0.096***	0.094***	0.096***
	(0.022)	(0.022)	(0.022)
some post-secondary	0.255***	0.253***	0.255***
	(0.029)	(0.029)	(0.029)
college or graduate	0.586***	0.585***	0.586***
	(0.067)	(0.067)	(0.067)
marriage status	0.130***	0.128***	0.128***
	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.019)
cohabitation status	0.042**	0.038**	0.037**
	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.014)
currently (exclusive)		-0.113*	
		(0.048)	
formerly		0.050*	0.077**
		(0.023)	(0.025)
currently (inclusive)			-0.008
			(0.065)
currently (inclusive): formerly			-0.520**
			(0.159)
Num.Obs.	20623	20623	20623
Num.Imp.	100	100	100

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table 7: attrition rates across survey waves

	Proportion of Respondents (Mother or Father) in Each Wave				
	0	1	3	5	9
Currently Incarcerated	.99 (4832)	.87 (4281)	.84 (4120)	.81 (3985)	.76 (3735)
Ever incarcerated	N/A	.89 (4347)	.88 (4330)	.91 (4453)	.76 (3735)

Table 8: proportion of families in each treatment group, across survey waves

	Proportion of Families in Each Wave				
	0	1	3	5	9
Currently Incarcerated	0.04 (182)	0.05 (256)	0.07 (323)	0.07 (331)	0.05 (244)
Ever incarcerated	N/A	0.22 (1095)	0.27 (1345)	0.29 (1418)	0.55 (2711)
Combined	0.04 (182)	0.28 (1351)	0.34 (1668)	0.36 (1749)	0.60 (2955)

Table 9

Mothers' Weekly Hours Worked (Naive)

	I:	II:	III:
ever	0.013		
	(0.009)		
race: Hispanic	-0.037**	-0.036*	-0.037**
	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.014)
race: other	0.005	0.003	0.004
	(0.026)	(0.026)	(0.026)
race: White	-0.125***	-0.125***	-0.126***
	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.016)
age	0.001	0.001	0.001
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
high school	0.064***	0.066***	0.067***
	(0.015)	(0.014)	(0.014)
some post-secondary	0.073***	0.074***	0.074***
	(0.013)	(0.012)	(0.012)
college or graduate	0.063***	0.064***	0.064***
	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.018)
marriage status	-0.028+	-0.027+	-0.027+
	(0.015)	(0.016)	(0.016)
cohabitation status	0.025	0.026	0.026
	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.016)
currently_only		0.021	
		(0.016)	
formerly		0.009	0.009
		(0.009)	(0.009)
currently			0.023
			(0.017)
currently:formerly			-0.044
			(0.101)
Num.Obs.	18721	18548	18178
Num.Imp.	100	100	100
+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001			

Table 10

Mothers' Weekly Wages (IV)

	I:	II:	III:
ever	0.018		
	(0.019)		
race: Hispanic	-0.092***	-0.095***	-0.095***
	(0.021)	(0.021)	(0.021)
race: other	0.051	0.049	0.048
	(0.038)	(0.038)	(0.038)
race: White	0.007	0.004	0.005
	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.019)
age	0.008***	0.008***	0.008***
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
high school	0.096***	0.094***	0.096***
	(0.022)	(0.022)	(0.022)
some post-secondary	0.255***	0.253***	0.255***
	(0.029)	(0.029)	(0.029)
college or graduate	0.586***	0.585***	0.586***
	(0.067)	(0.067)	(0.067)
marriage status	0.130***	0.128***	0.128***
	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.019)
cohabitation status	0.042**	0.038**	0.037**
	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.014)
currently (exclusive)		-0.113*	
		(0.048)	
formerly		0.050*	0.077**
		(0.023)	(0.025)
currently (inclusive)			-0.008
			(0.065)
currently (inclusive): formerly			-0.520**
			(0.159)
Num.Obs.	20623	20623	20623
Num.Imp.	100	100	100

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

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