

Incarceration, Prisoner Reentry, and Communities

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Abstract

Since the mid-1970s, the United States has experienced an enormous rise in incarceration and accompanying increases in returning prisoners and in postrelease community correctional supervision. Poor urban communities are disproportionately impacted by these phenomena. This review focuses on two complementary questions regarding incarceration, prisoner reentry, and communities: (a) whether and how mass incarceration has affected the social and economic structure of American communities, and (b) how residential neighborhoods affect the social and economic reintegration of returning prisoners. These two questions can be seen as part of a dynamic process involving a pernicious feedback loop in which mass incarceration undermines the structure and social organization of some communities, thus creating more criminogenic environments for returning prisoners and further diminishing their prospects for successful reentry and reintegration.

INTRODUCTION

Since the mid-1970s, the United States has experienced an enormous rise in incarceration. Whereas in 1975 the population in jails and prisons on any given day was roughly 400,000 people, by 2003 this number had increased more than fivefold to 2.1 million people (Western 2007), leading to what some have termed the era of mass imprisonment (Garland 2001, Mauer & Chesney-Lind 2002).¹ Although it is no longer increasing, the incarceration rate remains extremely high relative to other nations and to earlier periods in US history (Raphael & Stoll 2009b), with over 1.5 million individuals in state and federal prisons at the end of 2011 (Carson & Golinelli 2013). Because almost all prisoners are eventually released, mass incarceration has also produced a steep rise in the number of individuals reentering society after a stay in prison and undergoing the process of social and economic reintegration (Travis 2005). Over 700,000 individuals are now released from state and federal prisons each year (West et al. 2010).

Coinciding with the boom in incarceration rates, the amount of research conducted on the causes and consequences of mass incarceration has exploded in recent years. We document this phenomenon in **Figure 1** by plotting trends in the number of adults under correctional supervision and the number of scholarly articles published on incarceration. Whereas relatively little research was being published on incarceration during the 1980s and 1990s, there has been exponential growth since 2000.

¹Some scholars have argued that the term “mass incarceration” is a mischaracterization of the transformative change in the American criminal justice system. Wacquant (2010) prefers “hyperincarceration of (sub)proletarian African American men” to highlight the disproportionate impact incarceration has had on these groups. Weisberg & Petersilia (2010) are critical of the term for suggesting a conspiratorial view of state action and undermining the legitimate goals of incarceration by implying that “there is inherent value in reducing the size of the mass.” Other scholars use the term “carceral state” (Gottschalk 2008, Weaver & Lerman 2010), which refers more generally to a mode of government emphasizing surveillance, security, and punishment.

Several related literature reviews have been published in recent years, including those on parole and prisoner reentry (National Research Council 2008, Visher & Travis 2003), the social and economic consequences of incarceration (Wakefield & Uggen 2010), the health consequences of incarceration (Schnittker et al. 2011), the behavioral and political determinants of the prison boom (Gottschalk 2008, Jacobs & Jackson 2010, Raphael 2011), the consequences of mass incarceration for the children and families of those incarcerated (Comfort 2007, Wildeman & Muller 2012), and the effectiveness of correctional rehabilitation programs (Lipsey & Cullen 2007). Although we touch on some of the topics covered in these reviews, we focus on a set of interrelated questions that have been given relatively little attention in prior work: (a) How has mass incarceration affected the social and economic structure of American communities, and (b) how do residential neighborhoods influence the process of reintegration among returning prisoners? The first question asks whether moving a high volume of offenders from the community to prison and then back again undermines the fabric of communities that are most affected by these population flows. It evokes the counterfactual comparison of how and why communities would be different—especially in terms of public safety—if they experienced fewer residents going to prison and fewer individuals reentering after release from prison. The second question asks about the effects of community context on the process of prisoner reentry and the outcomes of former prisoners, forcing us to consider how and why the well-being of former prisoners depends on the neighborhoods they move to after prison. These two questions can also be seen as part of a dynamic process involving a potentially pernicious feedback loop: Mass incarceration could undermine the structure and social organization of some communities, thus creating more criminogenic environments for returning prisoners that further diminish their prospects for successful reentry.

In this article, we review the existing scholarship bearing upon these questions and offer

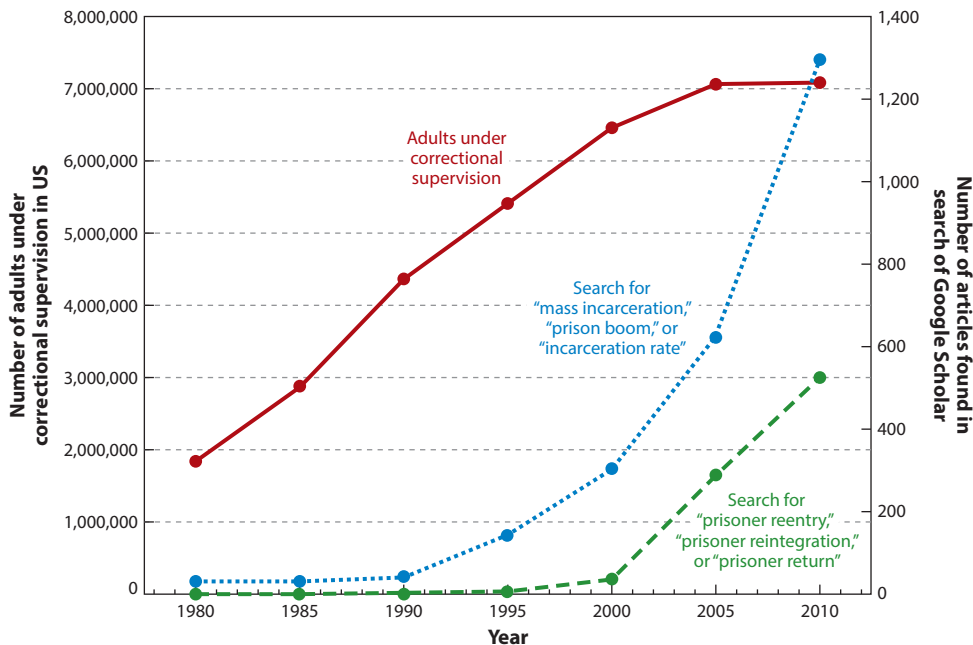


Figure 1

US adult residents supervised by adult correctional systems (jail, prison, probation, or parole) and scholarly articles on incarceration and prisoner reentry, 1980–2011. The article count was based on Google Scholar searches for the terms (*blue*) “mass incarceration,” “prison boom,” or “incarceration rate,” and (*green*) “prisoner reentry,” “prisoner reintegration,” or “prisoner return.” Source for correctional systems data is Glaze & Parks (2012, figure 1).

ideas to advance future research. We begin by providing an overview of the prison boom and its attendant consequences. Then we review the literature on the effects of incarceration and prisoner reentry on the communities from which prisoners are removed and to which they return after release, followed by a review of the literature on how neighborhood context affects the process of prisoner reentry. We conclude by considering the substantive implications of the current state of knowledge on the two questions that frame our study.

PRISONER REENTRY IN THE ERA OF MASS INCARCERATION

Understanding the links between incarceration, prisoner reentry, and communities requires an appreciation of four key features of the prison boom. First, the rise in incarceration has been disproportionately experienced by minorities,

particularly young black men, and by those with low levels of education. One study (Pew Center on the States 2008) estimates that one in nine African American men aged 20–34 is in prison on any given day, and among those with less than a high school degree the number is approximately one in three. More than half of African American men with less than a high school degree go to prison at some time in their lives (Pettit & Western 2004). Some scholars argue that the prison system now plays the same role in racial domination and exclusion as slavery, Jim Crow, and the ghetto did in previous historical periods, separating African Americans from whites, tainting blacks with a mark of inferiority, and providing a source of cheap and exploited labor (Alexander 2010, Wacquant 2001).

Second, although almost all communities are touched to some degree by prisoner

reentry, poor urban communities bear a disproportionate share of the burden, in terms of both prison admissions and releases (Clear 2007, Sampson & Loeffler 2010). As a result, the criminal justice system now touches nearly as many people in poor communities as the education system or the labor market. Many former prisoners return to communities to live alongside other former prisoners, which carries implications for competition for scarce resources, criminal opportunities, and the effectiveness of formal and informal social control.

Third, incarceration appears to exacerbate existing racial and socioeconomic inequalities by making those who are already disadvantaged even more so (Wakefield & Uggen 2010). Released prisoners are disadvantaged educationally, economically, and socially (Visser & Travis 2003). The flow of people into and out of prisons has contributed to increasing inequality in recent decades, primarily by reducing opportunities for employment and lowering wages among former prisoners, but also by decreasing the prevalence of two-parent families (Western 2007). One factor driving these effects is the stigma of having a felony record and serving time in prison (Holzer et al. 2007, Pager 2007). Another is the collateral consequences of imprisonment, such as statutes and administrative rules that bar offenders from means of social, economic, and political reintegration, including disqualifying some offenders from receiving public benefits, holding certain jobs, and voting or holding political office, as well as monetary penalties and fees levied on offenders under community supervision (Alexander 2010, Harris et al. 2010, Mauer & Chesney-Lind 2002). As a result, returning prisoners often have poor prospects for employment and struggle to make ends meet (Harding et al. 2014).

Finally, the prison boom was accompanied by an even larger boom in community corrections. The number of individuals on parole and probation also increased dramatically, to a point where recent estimates show that 1 in 31 American adults is either on probation, parole, or incarcerated on any given day (Pew Center

on the States 2009). As Wacquant (2001) notes, the carceral state now extends further into the community via probation and parole supervision than it did a few decades ago. As a result, the same communities that are faced with reintegrating former prisoners are also home to many residents on community supervision.

EFFECTS OF INCARCERATION AND REENTRY ON COMMUNITIES

We now turn to the question of how mass incarceration has affected the social and economic structure of American communities. Sampson (2011) recently observed that research on incarceration has undergone a sea change in recent years. Whereas this literature once focused almost exclusively on the deterrent and incapacitative effects of incarceration (e.g., Blumstein et al. 1978, Spelman 2000), it is now marked by growing concerns that incarceration may produce more crime than it prevents. There is a fairly large literature on the effects of incarceration on crime, composed largely of state- and county-level studies (Donohue 2009, Johnson & Raphael 2012, Liedka et al. 2006), but relatively little on how incarceration rates affect community structure and organization.

Theoretical Perspectives

We first consider the main theoretical arguments that inform research and policy debates on the consequences of incarceration. To structure this discussion, we present a typology in **Table 1** that classifies theoretical arguments according to whether they (a) imply positive or negative effects of incarceration and (b) address the consequences for individuals or communities.

First we consider the mechanisms through which incarceration could affect the individual. Incarceration may reduce offenders' future involvement in crime in the following ways:

1. Incapacitating offenders by removing them from the community (for a review of attempts to isolate the effects of

Table 1 Typology of mechanisms underlying theoretical perspectives on incarceration and crime

Influence of incarceration	Theoretical unit of analysis	
	Incarcerated offender	Community as a whole
Crime-reducing influences	Incapacitation Specific deterrence Rehabilitation	Incapacitation of the pool of potential offenders Enhanced informal social control by reducing level of community engagement General deterrence
Crime-promoting influences	Psychological trauma Exposure to schools of crime Weakened family ties Limited labor market opportunities	Adverse effects most likely to occur when prison cycling reaches critically high levels: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Disruptive effect on local economy ■ Reduced opportunities and incentives to marry ■ Potentially adverse effects of disrupting gang structure: replacement with more youthful offenders, violence sparked by gang splintering ■ Weakened informal social control (private, parochial, and public) by disrupting social networks Prison cycling may promote cultural/normative heterogeneity

incapacitation from other effects of incarceration, see Nagin et al. 2009).

2. Deterring one's future involvement in crime by increasing the perceived cost of engaging in future criminal activity, i.e., specific deterrence. Nagin et al. (2009) conclude the evidence that incarceration functions as a specific deterrent is weak. One possible reason is that some offenders may become less fearful of incarceration after serving time. Nonetheless, specific deterrence could be enhanced by laws that give repeat offenders, especially those who reoffend while on parole, harsher sanctions when convicted of new crimes.
3. Rehabilitating offenders through correction treatment programs. Recent reviews of the research on correctional treatment programs, including a comprehensive meta-analysis of published studies (see Lipsey & Cullen 2007), generally conclude that rehabilitation programs can reduce recidivism, but effectiveness varies considerably across programs.

Next we consider the other side of the ledger: whether incarceration could enhance one's future likelihood of offending by

1. having adverse psychological effects, including reactance, labeling, stigma, brutalization, and hardening of criminal identities;²
2. exposing inmates to schools of crime, where they may learn procriminal techniques and norms (Justice & Meares 2014, Lerman 2009);
3. weakening ties between offenders and their families (Lynch & Sabol 2004a); and
4. reducing opportunities for future employment and earnings by conferring stigma and stymying the development of labor market experience.³

The last column in **Table 1** summarizes mechanisms through which incarceration can affect the community as a whole. First, we consider pathways through which higher rates of incarceration may reduce community crime

² Reactance refers to a psychological theory about how individuals become aroused in response to perceived limits on their freedom and react by engaging in prohibited behaviors to restore their freedom (Brehm & Brehm 1981, Tittle & Paternoster 2000). For reviews of research on the psychological "pains of imprisonment," see Schnittker et al. (2012) and Schnittker (2014).

³ It is difficult to disentangle the effects on labor market outcomes of incarceration from those of having a felony conviction. For a review of this literature, see Bushway (2011).

rates. One is the community-level analog of an incapacitation effect: Incarceration removes people from the community who may have remained criminally active if they had not been locked up, although this could be offset by the flow of former inmates back into the community, some of whom may be motivated to reoffend. Second, incarceration could enhance informal social control if removing individuals who pose the most immediate threat to public safety in the community increases feelings of trust and cohesion among neighbors, makes them less fearful of interacting with one another, and increases their participation in efforts to prevent crime. Third, high rates of incarceration could function as a general deterrent—i.e., punishment that generally increases the perceived cost of crime, for any potential offender—by signaling that prison sentences could become more certain and/or severe as a response to felony offenses.

Next, we consider the pathways through which higher rates of incarceration could increase crime in local communities, which have been best articulated by Clear and colleagues in their arguments about the adverse effects of prison cycling, often referred to as coercive mobility theory (Clear 2007, Rose & Clear 1998). A general contention of this theory is that the disruptive effects of population turnover created by the cycling of offenders between prison and the community starts to overwhelm the protective effects of incarceration when it reaches moderately high levels, suggesting that there may be a tipping point beyond which removing more offenders from the community may trigger higher crime rates. Such cycling can harm the local economy by limiting the supply of local workers and reducing the purchasing power of families with incarcerated members, and it may weaken the local marriage market by reducing the pool of young males in the community, reducing their future earnings, and increasing the risk that women will stay in damaging/abusive relationships because they have little hope of finding another male partner. A more counterintuitive claim is that

cycling could increase the threat to public safety posed by local drug markets because drug dealing usually requires an organized group (or gang), and when members of the group are incarcerated, they must be replaced, often by recruiting younger members. Moreover, the incarceration of drug-gang leaders can splinter existing gangs into rival factions, leading to more violent conflict. One account of how gang splintering can promote violence emphasizes the zero-sum nature of drug markets and postulates that the incarceration of drug dealers in a community can confer quasi-monopoly status on drug dealers who remain active, which may incentivize them to scale up operations and diversify into other types of crime, with the end result being more turf wars and violence (Katyal 1997).

Yet another pathway through which prison cycling may increase crime in communities is by diminishing a community's capacity to exercise informal social control. The connection between population turnover and disruptions to informal social control has been well articulated by a long line of scholarship on social disorganization theory (e.g., Bursik & Grasmick 1993). High levels of population turnover have been shown to disrupt local social networks, which in turn can impede efforts to control crime at three levels: (a) the disruption of ties within families and primary groups can weaken private controls exercised within families or primary networks; (b) population turnover can also weaken parochial controls by disrupting secondary networks connecting residents to local institutions (e.g., schools, churches, businesses), thereby reducing their shared sense of obligation to the community and collective supervision of youth; and (c) prison cycling can disrupt public controls by weakening a community's political base and diminishing its ability to procure goods and services from outside agencies and governmental systems that could improve public safety. Finally, population turnover can increase cultural/normative heterogeneity by exposing those who have not been incarcerated to prison norms and subcultures and drawing new people into the neighborhood

with different norms and values, all of which could reduce a community's capacity to regulate itself.

Empirical Evidence

Prisoner reentry is a geographically concentrated phenomenon in the sense that most returning prisoners move to a relatively small number of cities, counties, and even neighborhoods (Harding et al. 2013, La Vigne 2005, Pew Center on the States 2009, Sampson & Loeffler 2010, Visser & Farrell 2005). For example, data we collected on all Michigan prisoners ($n = 11,064$) paroled in 2003 (Morenoff & Harding 2011) show that half of all returning parolees were concentrated in 12% of Michigan's census tracts (which were nested within three counties), and one-quarter of the parolees were concentrated in just 2% of the tracts.

We now consider the research on how high rates of incarceration affect public safety in communities. A series of studies conducted on data collected by Clear and colleagues on 80 neighborhoods in Tallahassee (Clear 2007, Clear et al. 2003, Dhondt 2012) found that higher rates of prison admission and release in neighborhoods were associated with higher rates of crime, as predicted by coercive mobility theory. Another finding from these studies is that the association between rates of prison admission and crime was nonlinear: The relationship was not significant when the admissions rate was low, but once it reached a moderate level, additional increases to the admissions rate were significantly associated with higher crime rates, consistent with coercive mobility theory.⁴

The findings from studies in other cities have been more equivocal. Higher rates of prison release were associated with higher levels of crime in a study of Sacramento neighbor-

hoods (Hipp & Yates 2009) and lower levels of social organization in studies of Sacramento (Hipp & Yates 2009) and Seattle neighborhoods (Drakulich et al. 2012). Rates of prison admission were positively associated with crime in a study of Portland neighborhoods (Renauer & Cunningham 2006), but this finding was only partially replicated in a study of New York City neighborhoods (Fagan et al. 2003),⁵ whereas a study of Baltimore neighborhoods (Lynch & Sabol 2004b) found that admission rates were not associated with crime or with most indicators of neighborhood social disorganization.⁶ Moreover, only one of these studies (Renauer & Cunningham 2006) reported a nonlinear relationship between admissions and crime, and this result was sensitive to estimation technique and outlying observations.

Critical Assessment and Future Directions

Our review of research on neighborhoods and incarceration suggests that the empirical evidence to date is still scant and the picture somewhat murky. The handful of prior studies are based on relatively small samples of

⁵Fagan and colleagues (2003) found that neighborhood-level jail and prison admissions were significantly associated with higher felony rates in a cross-sectional analysis, but higher admissions rates were associated with declines over time in felonies. Moreover, they found no significant associations between admission rates and homicide rates in either their cross-sectional or longitudinal analyses.

⁶Higher admissions rates were associated with lower levels of community solidarity but were not associated with informal social control, neighborly behavior, or participation in voluntary associations. Lynch & Sabol (2004b) used an instrumental variable design to address the simultaneity problem in estimating the effects of incarceration on crime and social disorganization. The instrument was the residual term from a regression of change in drug arrest rates on change in the index crime rate, which the authors interpreted as the number of drug arrests that would not be expected based on the total crime rate, thus reflecting police discretion. We note that this strategy does not entirely overcome the simultaneity problem because the instrument was constructed from a model with an endogenous regressor (drug arrests). Moreover, the two-stage least squares model requires the strong assumption that discretionary drug arrests (the instrument) is uncorrelated with all unobserved factors that might influence neighborhood incarceration rates and crime rates.

⁴In the Dhondt (2012) study, the relationship between incarceration and crime was nonlinear only when the former was measured with a scale combining rates of prison admissions and releases.

neighborhoods, and most rely on static cross-neighborhood comparisons that are susceptible to omitted variable bias and reverse causality. Moreover, some results appear to be sensitive to the estimation techniques and samples used in the analysis. All of this makes it difficult to judge what the consequences of incarceration are for communities in general and whether there is support for the specific propositions of coercive mobility theory. Nonetheless, the theory offers compelling ideas that deserve further empirical attention.

There are also other reasons to be skeptical about prior research on the aggregate relationship between rates of incarceration and crime. Durlauf & Nagin (2011) admonished that in addition to being plagued by methodological limitations, most studies of the aggregate relationship between rates of incarceration and crime lack a clear causal focus because they do not analyze the institutional processes involved in changing the incarceration rate. Although we share this critical assessment of the literature, we note that it is most applicable to studies that use aggregate data (typically at the state or county level) to test individual-level theories about the deterrent effect of incarceration. In such studies, there is a disconnect between the theoretical unit of analysis (the individual) and the empirical unit of analysis (the state or county), and because they focus on the aggregate relationship between incarceration and crime, they reveal little about how changing the incarceration rate might change individual behavior. In contrast, the theoretical and empirical units of analysis are aligned in most neighborhood-level studies of the relationship between incarceration and crime because their primary focus is on neighborhood-level mechanisms that influence the amount of crime being committed in a given community, such as population cycling, gang turnover, informal social control, and local norms.

That said, our review of the literature on incarceration's effects on communities revealed the need for advancement in several areas. First, although the causal question may be justified,

it is not clear that the temporal and spatial neighborhood comparisons that are needed to identify effects of incarceration on crime exist in sufficient quantity. It is difficult to contemplate, much less find, a set of natural conditions that approximate a randomized assignment of incarceration in-flows and out-flows to neighborhoods or even to compare sets of neighborhoods that experience different levels of population mobility due to incarceration while holding all else constant. This makes empirical studies very reliant on anomalous cases.

Second, although coercive mobility theory is clearly articulated and compelling, its prediction of a nonlinear relationship between incarceration and crime is somewhat vague. It is difficult to specify theoretically the point at which the effect of incarceration on crime should change from negative to positive. Also, it is difficult to estimate complex nonlinear functions on relatively small samples of neighborhoods, and thus it should not be surprising that results are sensitive to changes in model specification or the removal of anomalous cases. Perhaps instead of searching for a particular type of curvilinear relationship between incarceration and crime, researchers should expand their analysis beyond models of crime and collect data on some of the key mechanisms through which the criminogenic effects of incarceration may operate—e.g., network structure and density; the effectiveness of private, parochial, and public controls; patterns of residential mobility after returning from prison; the degree of cultural heterogeneity in a community; and the dynamics of local drug markets. This research could take a cue from state-level studies of incarceration and crime by making better use of panel data to shore up causal inferences. Also, coercive mobility is primarily a unidirectional theory about the effects of increasing incarceration rates on communities, but recent efforts by some states to lower their incarceration rates make it important to develop theoretical accounts that could help us understand the consequences of declining rates.

EFFECTS OF COMMUNITIES ON PRISONER REENTRY

Theoretical Perspectives

What might explain the effects of community context on prisoner reentry outcomes? One perspective comes from theories on the adverse consequences of living in neighborhoods with high concentrations of disadvantaged households. An influential theory of this kind was articulated by Wilson (1987, 1996) in his work on the geographic concentration of poverty and joblessness in urban neighborhoods, which he linked to deindustrialization and the spatial mismatch created between the skills of job seekers and job openings in urban communities. Wilson theorized that these changes left residents of many urban communities more socially isolated in the sense that they could not rely on social networks to get help finding a job, borrowing money, or getting transportation. Returning prisoners may be especially vulnerable to the effects of neighborhood social isolation because they already face considerable labor market barriers, including lack of human capital, stigma from employers, and legal exclusion from some occupations and public benefits (Brucker 2006, Bushway et al. 2007, Harding et al. 2014, Travis 2005). In a related theory on disadvantaged neighborhoods, Crutchfield and colleagues (Crutchfield et al. 2006, Drakulich et al. 2012) argued that neighborhoods where many residents have weak attachment and commitment to conventional jobs are likely to expose returning prisoners to social situations that are conducive to crime.

A second perspective focuses on how neighborhood disadvantage and residential instability can undermine residents' capacity to exercise informal social control by impeding the creation and maintenance of local social networks, community organizations, and a shared sense of cohesion and trust among neighbors (Sampson 1999; Sampson et al. 1997, 1999). Rose & Clear (1998) theorized that these problems are especially pernicious in disadvantaged neighborhoods where residents' ties with one

another become attenuated by high levels of prison cycling. Such neighborhood conditions, they argue, undermine systems of private and parochial control, thus diminishing the amount of collective supervision and surveillance and creating a climate in which it is difficult to foster norms of mutual obligation among neighbors. Former prisoners who return to neighborhoods with lower levels of informal social control may face fewer sanctions for deviant behavior and more opportunities to return to crime. Returning prisoners also tend to have very unstable living situations, making it more difficult for them to build local social networks and participate in local organizations (Swaroop & Morenoff 2005). In our Michigan sample, the median returning prisoner experienced 2.6 residential moves per year, or one move every 4.5 months (Harding et al. 2013).

A third perspective on how neighborhoods can influence returning prisoners' ability to reintegrate focuses on normative environments. Shaw & McKay (1969 [1942], p. 170) argued that socially disorganized slum neighborhoods contain a wide array of "competing and conflicting moral values," both conventional and unconventional, creating a breakdown of social control and a cultural environment in which "delinquency has developed as a powerful competing way of life." More recently, Rose & Clear (1998, p. 450) argued that high levels of prison cycling "open opportunities for entrance of newcomers (with potentially different norms and values) into the neighborhood" and "increase opportunities to be socialized into prison subcultures." Normative environments may also be important for understanding how returning prisoners are treated by community members. For example, research has shown that there is variance across communities in prevailing narratives about the nature of crime, who is responsible for it, and who is victimized by it (Leverentz 2010). The degree of mistrust and antagonism toward agents of the law (or legal cynicism) in a community can also influence residents' willingness to cooperate with one another and the police (Kirk & Matsuda 2011, Tyler & Fagan 2008).

A fourth perspective concerns the problems former prisoners encounter when they return home to areas where they lived prior to prison. People who move back to the same areas where they lived before prison may renew ties with friends and acquaintances who provide opportunities and motivations to engage in crime (Kirk 2009, 2012). Returning home could be especially detrimental for addicts who were able to maintain sobriety while in prison because encountering environmental stimuli and places associated with prior drug use could trigger a “cue-reactivity” process (Carter & Tiffany 1999) that leads to drug cravings and risk of relapse.

The theoretical perspectives covered so far have all focused on the effects of neighborhood environments on the attitudes and behavior of returning prisoners. Another approach to understanding the role that neighborhood context might play in prisoner reintegration is rooted in ideas about how institutional reactions to deviance may vary across communities. Prior research suggests that police practices vary considerably across neighborhoods, in such a way that “disadvantaged areas are both overpoliced and underpoliced” (Lerman & Weaver 2014, p. 204). On the one hand, poor and nonwhite jurisdictions tend to have less police protection per recorded crime (Thacher 2010). On the other hand, in more disadvantaged, higher-crime neighborhoods, police are more likely to arrest suspects they encounter and use coercive force and less likely to provide citizens with assistance and information or file incident reports (Smith 1996, Sun et al. 2008). Lerman & Weaver (2014) argued that heavy use of stop-and-frisk tactics, especially when suspects are not engaged in illicit activity, is likely to have a chilling effect on the willingness of residents to reach out to the police and engage in other forms of civic life.

Equally important to understanding the reentry process—though rarely studied—is how neighborhood context influences the behavior of parole and probation officers. Grattet et al. (2011) offered a framework for studying the formal and informal features of

what they call “supervision regimes.” The formal side of supervision regimes refers to the laws and policies regarding supervision, which are usually determined at the state level and shaped by the political and historical context in which criminal justice institutions developed and currently operate. More salient to understanding neighborhood effects are the informal features of supervision regimes, which refer to how agents use their discretion over reporting and sanctioning deviance and can be influenced by local professional norms, workload management pressures, and other resource constraints. Grattet et al. (2011) also defined three measureable dimensions of supervision regimes: (a) the intensity of parole supervision, referring to how closely parolees are monitored (e.g., frequency of reporting and drug testing); (b) the system’s capacity to supervise parolees and detect deviant behavior, which is determined by human resources (e.g., caseload size and type), and the laws and policies that constitute the official procedures for supervision; and (c) parole agents’ tolerance for deviance, as manifested in how they use their discretion in reporting and sanctioning parole violations.

Another important aspect of the local institutional context of prisoner reintegration is access to social services. Scholars are only beginning to understand how institutional resources are distributed across local communities. Small & McDermott (2006) showed that, contrary to the widely held belief that poorer neighborhoods have fewer organizational resources, they actually have slightly more commercial establishments (e.g., pharmacies, grocery stores, and child care centers), although poor black neighborhoods with declining populations have fewer such establishments. Social service organizations that provide employment assistance, drug and alcohol treatment, and help meeting basic needs for food and shelter are especially important to returning prisoners. Hipp et al. (2009, 2011) examined variation in proximity to social and health service providers among parolees in California and found that although black and Hispanic parolees had more service

providers near them than did white parolees, these providers faced a much greater potential demand for their services. Thus, the concentration of former prisoners in neighborhoods with others who have significant needs may overtax available services.

Empirical Evidence

To date, the literature on neighborhood context and prisoner reentry remains relatively small and focused on recidivism. The data challenges in this area are considerable, as current and former prisoners are often underrepresented in large-scale surveys, and many corrections agency databases do not include records on where parolees live. Nonetheless, most studies that have been able to access residential information in administrative records on returning prisoners—including those conducted in California (Hipp et al. 2010), Florida (Mears et al. 2008), and Multnomah County, Oregon (Kubrin & Stewart 2006)—have found that the risk of recidivism (measured by arrests, felony convictions, parole violations, or returns to prison) was greater for those living in disadvantaged tracts or counties.⁷ A study of returning prisoners in Iowa (Tillyer & Vose 2011) found no relationship between county-level disadvantage and recidivism, but living in a more residentially stable county was associated with a lower risk of recidivism.

A second set of studies examines the relationship between county-level labor market conditions and returning prisoners' employment and recidivism outcomes. In a study of California parolees, Raphael & Weiman (2007)

found that being released to a county with a high unemployment rate was associated with a lower risk of being returned to custody. Wang et al. (2010) found similar results for a sample of returning prisoners in Florida.⁸ County unemployment rates were also negatively associated with employment outcomes in a study of returning prisoners in Ohio (Sabol 2007).

Some studies have examined the effects of returning home or to areas with higher concentrations of former offenders. In the only study to leverage quasi-experimental conditions to address concerns about neighborhood selection, Kirk (2009, 2012) used the destruction of housing units by Hurricane Katrina as an exogenous determinant of residential options for parolees in New Orleans. He found that compared with parolees who returned to their former place of residence, parolees who were displaced by the residential destruction and forced to settle elsewhere after prison had a substantially lower risk of reincarceration (Kirk 2009) that persisted throughout the three-year observation period (Kirk 2012). Using a different approach to study a similar phenomenon, Stahler et al. (2013) found that prisoners returning to Philadelphia neighborhoods were more likely to recidivate when they lived nearby higher concentrations of other ex-offenders who recidivated.⁹

Finally, some studies have examined the role of institutions in neighborhood effects on recidivism. Lin et al. (2010) studied institutional reactions to parolee deviance by modeling the risk of being returned to prison as a sanction for

⁷ Similar results were found in unpublished studies of returning prisoners in Michigan (Morenoff & Harding 2011) and Ohio (Huggins 2009), and a published study of delinquent male juveniles in Philadelphia (Grunwald et al. 2010). Two studies have found no relationship between neighborhood disadvantage and recidivism. One was a study of former prisoners returning to select Baltimore neighborhoods (Gottfredson & Taylor 1988) that summarized but did not report results from statistical models. Another was a study with a much different sampling frame: offenders with felony convictions (mostly probationers) in Wayne County, Michigan (Wehrman 2010).

⁸ Wang et al. (2010) used race-specific contextual variables and ran race-specific models. They found that among blacks, high county unemployment was associated with a higher risk of violent recidivism, whereas among whites, violent recidivism was lower in counties with higher rates of manufacturing employment.

⁹ To analyze contagion, they constructed a measure of the percentage of ex-offenders living within one mile of each subject who recidivated within three years. We caution against interpreting this as evidence of contagion, however, because their spatial concentration measure was based on preprison addresses, and they did not address the issue of endogeneity bias in their spatial model from using one measure of recidivism to predict another.

a parole violation among returning prisoners in California. Among those who had parole violations, the risk of being returned was greater in counties with more punitive political environments (based on election results from two punishment-oriented ballot propositions). A separate study of California parolees (Hipp et al. 2010) found that living near a higher density of social service organizations was associated with a lower risk of recidivating, but living in areas with a higher “potential demand” for social services increased the risk of recidivism. In another study of this kind, Wallace & Papachristos (2012) conducted a zip-code-level analysis of the association between the presence of health care organizations (HCOs) and firearm-related felonies in Chicago. Although measures of HCO density and its change over time did not significantly predict recidivism rates, there was an interaction whereby HCO loss was associated with higher recidivism rates in more disadvantaged areas.

Critical Assessment and Future Directions

Although most studies find significant associations between measures of neighborhood context and recidivism, this evidence is still far from conclusive, and much remains to be learned about the role communities play in prisoner reentry. First, most prior studies have paid too little attention to issues of causal inference in estimating neighborhood effects (for exceptions, see Kirk 2009, 2012; Raphael & Weiman 2007). As with other neighborhood effects studies, the concern is that unobserved factors could simultaneously determine the neighborhoods people live in and their outcomes of interest, thereby confounding causal inferences about neighborhood context. This problem becomes even more concerning in the case of returning prisoners because of the critical role played by criminal justice and social service institutions in determining where former offenders are able to live and find work, the type of supervision they will face, and the nature of their encounters with police. One way to address such concerns is by

finding natural experiments that exogenously influence where people live, such as Kirk’s studies of prisoner reentry after Hurricane Katrina (Kirk 2009, 2012) or policy initiatives that randomly assign parolees to live in different types of neighborhoods. Alternatively, longitudinal designs with individual fixed effects can eliminate the threat of unobserved factors that remain constant over time (Halaby 2004) when studying the effects of change in neighborhood context on former prisoners. It may be especially useful to study ex-offenders who have been released from prison multiple times and capitalize on the variability in the neighborhood environments they encounter. However, researchers must be wary of adjusting for time-varying covariates that are both consequences and determinants of neighborhood context (e.g., substance use and employment) and in such cases consider using methods that address this problem, such as inverse-probability-of-treatment weighting (Wodtke et al. 2011). When none of these options is available, sensitivity analysis can help qualify how susceptible results are to residual confounding, and methods such as propensity score matching can ensure that researchers are properly handling selection on observable factors (Harding 2003).

Second, the processes by which former prisoners are sorted into neighborhoods deserve greater attention for substantive and methodological reasons. Qualitative research has shown that former prisoners experience many obstacles to finding housing (Harding et al. 2014, Leverentz 2010), and often their only options are to live with relatives who will take them in or in subsidized housing, which often lands them in disadvantaged communities. Also, fewer prisoners return to the same places they lived prior to prison than is commonly believed (Harding et al. 2013, Visser et al. 2004), often because their family members have not been able to maintain a stable residence in their absence. Moreover, former prisoners’ living arrangements tend to be quite unstable and are often disrupted by short-term custody spells in jails, residential treatment

centers, and programs for technical rule violators (Harding et al. 2013). There is also evidence of racial/ethnic differences in the effect of incarceration on neighborhood attainment. Massoglia et al. (2012) found that although the preprison neighborhoods of black and Hispanic offenders were more disadvantaged, whites were the only group to experience a significant decline in neighborhood quality after prison. Still, most studies of neighborhood effects on recidivism include controls for characteristics of preprison neighborhoods.

Third, a fuller understanding of neighborhood effects on former prisoners requires studying the mechanisms through which such effects come about. This would mean moving beyond the compositional characteristics of neighborhoods measured by the census to some of the social, cultural, and institutional dimensions of neighborhood environments discussed above. One path for such research is collecting primary data on neighborhoods through surveys or systematic social observation and using econometric methods to construct neighborhood measures (Raudenbush & Sampson 1999, Sampson & Raudenbush 1999). These measures can be very useful, but they are also relatively expensive to collect. Another approach is to construct theoretically motivated measures of neighborhood mechanisms from secondary sources, such as records from government agencies on arrests and citizen calls for service (Lerman & Weaver 2014, O'Brien et al. 2013, Peterson & Krivo 2010) or observations of neighborhood characteristics made from Google Street View (Clarke et al. 2010, Odgers et al. 2012).

Fourth, learning more about the institutional processes through which the effects of place may operate would make this area of research much more relevant to policy makers. Future research on neighborhoods and prisoner reentry would benefit from analyzing local variation in police behavior (Lerman & Weaver 2014), supervision regimes (Grattet et al. 2011), and other institutional processes. In the absence of direct measures of such institutional

factors, researchers could also infer their operation indirectly by analyzing the relationship between contextual factors and recidivism outcomes drawn from multiple sources, such as arrests, felony convictions, parole violations, and returns to prison. For example, if neighborhood effects were larger for arrests and technical parole violations than for felony convictions, it might suggest that the behavior of law enforcement and community corrections agents could be playing an important role. Similar insights could emerge from analyzing offense-specific measures of recidivism and examining effect heterogeneity by particular groups of ex-offenders. Yet another way to detect the possible operation of institutional mechanisms could be to analyze contextual characteristics measured at different geographic scales. For example, Douglas-Siegel et al. (2012) found that tract-level characteristics are significantly related to the incidence of parole violations, but county-level characteristics are stronger predictors of the type of sanction imposed for a given violation. This suggests that although neighborhood contextual factors may influence parolee deviance, the political and organizational contexts that differ across counties may be more important determinants of official reactions to deviance.

Finally, this literature would benefit from moving beyond its currently narrow focus on recidivism to consider how neighborhood context influences other aspects of the social and economic reintegration of former prisoners. For example, future research might consider the role of neighborhood context in immediate life circumstances that have been linked to crime trajectories (Horney et al. 1995, Laub & Sampson 2001), such as family formation/reunification, school enrollment, employment, and substance use. Other important aspects of prisoner reintegration in which neighborhoods could play an important role include the formation of social ties (Berg & Huebner 2010), civic participation (Burch 2014, Lerman & Weaver 2014), and health (Schnittker & John 2007).

CONCLUSION

This review has focused on two aspects of incarceration, prisoner reentry, and communities: (a) the impact of high rates of incarceration and prisoner reentry on communities and (b) the role that communities play in the social and economic reintegration of former prisoners. We have largely treated these topics separately. In closing, we note two important ways in which they are linked together. The first is that when viewed as linked dynamic processes, the impact of incarceration on communities and the impact of communities on reentry together create a pernicious cycle of decline in the communities most affected by high rates of incarceration. As social control, social ties, safety, and economic resources are strained in communities with high rates of incarceration and reentry, those communities are less and less able to provide supportive environments for those leaving prison, leading to greater reintegration difficulties at the individual level. In turn, as individuals leaving prison have trouble finding employment and avoiding crime, the social and institutional foundations of their communities are further weakened. These mutually reinforcing processes are a potentially important avenue through which mass incarceration

has affected poor, urban, minority communities. Such dynamics might be fruitfully explored using agent-based models (see Bruch & Atwell 2014 for an overview).

Second, institutional actors play an important role in all aspects of the dynamic process involving incarceration, communities, and reentry. At the community level, rates of incarceration and the nature of community corrections supervision are a function of political processes and bureaucratic decisions at the city, state, and national levels (Fagan et al. 2003, Grattet et al. 2011). Moreover, the heavy reliance on incarceration as a formal control may weaken the social ties and community structures that support informal social control (Rose & Clear 1998). At the individual level, the outcomes of former prisoners are a function of both their own decisions and behaviors and those of institutional actors like police, community corrections agents, and service providers. In line with an emerging research agenda on the role of institutions, organizations, and systems in urban poverty (Allard & Small 2013), we believe these dynamics draw our attention to the role of macro- and meso-level forms of social organization, both formal and informal, in generating, sustaining, or ameliorating poverty and inequality.

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