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Paternal Incarceration: What Can We Learn Based on Evidence from a Danish Policy Shock?

Podcast transcript and edited interview

Featuring Christopher Wildeman, Associate Professor of Policy Analysis and Management (PAM) in the College of Human Ecology at Cornell University

Hosted by Dave Chancellor

Chancellor Hello, you're listening to a podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. I'm Dave Chancellor.

For this, our July 2016 podcast, I talked with Chris Wildeman of Cornell University. Wildeman is an associate professor of policy analysis and management at Cornell's College of Human Ecology and an IRP affiliate. When he visited IRP in March of year, we talked about a paper he wrote called "Paternal Incarceration and Children's Risk of Being Charged by Early Adulthood: Evidence from a Danish Policy Shock."

When we started talking, Wildeman said there are a couple of key reasons why we should be interested in paternal incarceration.

Wildeman The first is that incarceration is now incredibly common in the U.S. And this is a historical anomaly, so, the U.S. incarceration rate increased from about 200 or 250 per 100,000 to 700 to 800 per 100,000 between the early 1970s and the contemporary period. So, incarceration rates are historically anomalous. They're also comparatively anomalous in the sense that no other developed democracy in the world has an incarceration rate that even gets close to the U.S. rate of incarceration. The other component that's important to think about in terms of parental incarceration is its concentration. African American children, children whose parents have low levels of education attainment, and especially African American children whose parents have low levels of education attainment, experience parental incarceration at very, very high rates. And so when we think about the consequences of parental incarceration, we're interested not just in how parental incarceration affects individual children, but also how it could contribute to the intergenerational transmission of criminal justice contact, inequality more broadly... And those were sort of the big motivating factors in terms of thinking about the effects of incarceration on children.

Chancellor Wildeman says there hasn't been much research in this area that uses an experimental design or, put another way, research that lets us estimate a cause and effect type of relationship between parental incarceration and kids' outcomes.

Wildeman And there are sort of two reasons for that, right? The first is that even if we could experimentally vary parental incarceration, it's not clear that, ethically we would want to do that just in the interest of getting this sort of causal estimate out of something. And it's also not clear that even if we did experimentally vary it, we'd be able to tie dads' experiencing incarceration to their kids' outcomes in any sort of discernable way because the men who experience incarceration at some point in their lives are much less likely to be listed on the birth certificates of their children than men who don't. And so there are all of these sort of serious obstacles to generating something resembling a causal estimate in this area.

- Chancellor But, as the title of Wildeman's paper suggests, there was a major policy change in Denmark that provided him with an experimental setup to look at how variations in paternal incarceration affected kids.
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- Wildeman The basic idea behind the Danish policy shock that we use is just that in the early 2000s, a law was passed that basically said that folks who were given incarceration spells of less than 6 months for a specific set of offenses, rather than all experiencing incarceration, if they were convicted, some of them would be eligible for probation with community service instead. There's essentially this huge shift for a series of relatively low-level offenses, from everybody being incarcerated for up to six months, to a much smaller proportion of folks being incarcerated for that period of time.
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- Chancellor Wildeman used what's called a difference in difference design to look at those who received community service versus those who were incarcerated.
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- Wildeman The basic idea — as a non economist, I always appreciate the intuitive explanations for these things because I don't really care about math at all, but the intuitive explanation is that you have a group of folks that the reform applied to. And then you have a group of folks that the reform didn't apply to. So there are people with longer sentences for instance — that the reform wouldn't apply to, for instance, folks who had a sentence of more than six months or more than nine months or more than a year, weren't eligible for the reform. Folks who committed certain other types of offenses wouldn't have been eligible for the reform and so essentially what we do is we look at the difference in children's incarceration rates in the future between folks who were and weren't eligible for the policy reform. And on the basis of that, we're not able to get an individual level estimate of the effect of paternal incarceration on children but we are able to get an estimate of how much that reform decreased the probability of incarceration for the children in those more recent cohorts.
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- Chancellor Wildeman says the exact results varied a bit depending on how they set up their analysis.
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- Wildeman The sort of short story is that we found clear, consistent effects for boys and somewhat inconsistent effects for girls which is not totally surprising, given the much higher rates of criminal justice involvement among boys. It may be that there's some sort of floor effect going on for girls. Depending on the model specification and the comparison group, the reform decreased the probability of experiencing incarceration for the boys after the reform between six percentage points and ten percentage points. And that adds up to a really substantial decrease in their risk of experiencing criminal justice contact themselves.
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- Chancellor These results are interesting, Wildeman says, in part because they give U.S. researchers an idea of what a valid study in the U.S. context might look like.
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- Wildeman I think with a study like this, you can talk about the direct policy implications, and I'll do that in just a second, but part of what's interesting too is just showing folks who are working within this research area using U.S. data, what sort of design could make us feel confident in estimating how much the criminal justice system affects the life chances of children? And so thinking about it within that context, part of what we were hoping to do was less directly inform policy with this specific paper and more sort of help us think through where U.S.-based work might go. I think how you think about the policy implications depends on how reliable you think the estimates are.
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- Chancellor And, while Wildeman sees this study as being potentially instructive to researchers looking at the U.S., he says we should be cautious about extrapolating these findings from Denmark to the U.S. policy landscape.
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- Wildeman In the Danish context, I think it's pretty clear that this is a pretty massive win and a bunch of the other criminal justice interventions that they've come up with seem like they're pretty massive wins. Within the U.S. context, it's a little bit trickier, even when we focus just on offenders who are committing very similar crimes to the crimes to the crimes that we're focusing on in Denmark. So one of the tricky things, right, is that there's this really broad social safety net in the Danish context and on the basis of that, you could

Wildeman, cont. you could think that the effects of paternal incarceration could be bigger there, you could think that the effects of paternal incarceration could be smaller there.

Chancellor Wildeman says that Danish dads who didn't experience incarceration but were on probation would have been encouraged or even made to participate in programs to help with addiction problems, help with job training, and so on.

Wildeman Whereas in the U.S. context, for those folks who wouldn't experience incarceration, they generally would experience probation with almost no sort of services offered whereas in Denmark you'd have sort of what we would think about as wraparound services. So, on the basis of that, you could think that the effects of parental incarceration on kids could be larger in the Danish context than on the U.S. context, but then you could also think that these sort of broad social safety net kind of programs actually diminish the effects of paternal incarceration on kids because their families are sort of buffered more. And so I think how it relates to the U.S. policy context is really unclear. The big key is just that it does tell us that if we had policy interventions like this, where we were not only able to look at the folks who would have experienced incarceration, but that were also able to link those kids through administrative data to their dads, that we could also figure out what the broader spillover effects of these policy changes are.

Chancellor Thanks to Chris Wildeman for sharing this work with us.

This has been a podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty. For more in this series, you can subscribe to our monthly podcast on iTunesU.

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