



DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS SEMINAR SERIES

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

Since the early 1970s, the United States has experienced a dramatic surge in imprisonment, especially among the African American men. This paper investigates the causal impacts of incarceration of black men on black women's marriage, fertility, and labor market outcomes, as well as black children's family structure and long-run education and income. To establish causality, I exploit plausibly exogenous changes in state and federal sentencing policies and construct a simulated instrumental variable for the incarceration rate, using offender-level data on the universe of prisoners admitted to and released from prisons between 1986 and 2009. The instrument characterizes how sentencing policies affect incarceration both at the extensive margin, through whether or not to incarcerate arrestees, and at the intensive margin, through how long to keep inmates in prison. I find that higher incarceration rates of black men lower the likelihood of marriage and increase the likelihood of employment for black women, and increase the likelihood of out-of-wedlock birth and living with mother only for black children. In the long run, black children who grow up in areas with higher incarceration rates of black men are less likely to obtain at least some college education in early adulthood, and black boys who grow up in areas with harsher sentencing policies are more likely to have lower incomes in adulthood compared with white boys who grow up in the same area with the same parent income.

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