CONSEQUENCES OF PARTNER INCARCERATION FOR WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT


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Social scientists have amassed considerable evidence that incarceration has detrimental consequences for employment. Incarceration pushes inmates out of jobs, reduces employment prospects upon release, and confines former inmates to low-paying jobs. The exclusive focus on employment outcomes of individuals who come into "direct" contact with the penal system means we may have underestimated the impact of incarceration on labor market outcomes. Incarcerated men are connected to girlfriends, wives, mothers and children who “do time” along with them. Indeed, several studies have documented the reduced income and substantial expenses associated with the incarceration of a family member, but we know little about how the predominantly poor, racial/ethnic minority women heading these families respond to the economic difficulties they face. Using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, this dissertation investigates whether and under what circumstances women with incarcerated partners use formal, paid labor or other strategies to address the costs associated with incarceration. The first empirical chapter shows that partner incarceration is not associated with the number of hours women work at their primary jobs, except among relatively small groups of more advantaged women (e.g., white women and married women). This chapter adds to a growing body of research documenting heterogeneity in the consequences of incarceration for families. Expanding on these findings, the second empirical chapter shows that women with incarcerated partners are more likely to work multiple concurrent jobs than women in otherwise similar circumstances. That changes in women's employment are constrained, by and large, to multiple job holding suggests women with incarcerated partners shoulder a heavy burden to meet the needs of their families. The third empirical chapter builds on analyses in the preceding chapters to consider how women's employment changes in tandem with other financial resources. Increases in hours at their main jobs, coupled with few other resources, are most common. However, hours reductions and persistent unemployment, paired with public assistance receipt, are not unusual. These results further illustrate heterogeneity in women's employment response and draw attention to the additional resources on which women rely. Overall, this dissertation advances knowledge about not only the collateral consequences of mass incarceration but also the social and economic context shaping the employment of disadvantaged women.

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