HOW FAR UP THE RIVER? ASSESSING THE CONSEQUENCES OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE CONTACT


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Existing research has shown that the rise of incarceration that occurred during the prison boom had a substantial effect on the stabilizing forces of employment and health. Incarceration hinders the ability to retain and procure employment as well as increasing the exposure to disease and magnifying negative mental health outcomes. Given that the jail population grew in line with prison incarceration during this period, investigating the effects of less severe forms of criminal justice contact is integral to understanding the full consequences of contact. The conditions and circumstances that render long-term incarceration impactful are also present for arrests, convictions and jail stays. Contact of any form and degree causes separation from society, which can hinder the attainment and maintenance of employment. Furthermore, the stigma from a criminal or arrest record can inhibit employment prospects and wage growth due to the proliferation of background checks for potential employees severed job networks. On the health side, the exposure to individuals with communicable diseases facilitates the transmission of disease while the stress of incarceration and lack of adequate medical facilities assist in exacerbating existing conditions. The stress and strain of even low level contact can facilitate the worsening of both physical and mental health outcomes.

Using the NLSY97, this project explores employment and health outcomes as a result of arrests, convictions and jail stays. Results show that both wages and consistency of employment are detrimentally affected by an arrest, arrest without conviction and jail time. The findings show a potential incapacitation effect of low level criminal justice contact that has short-lived but substantial impacts on employment outcomes. For health, the results find that low level forms of contact negatively impact both physical and mental health outcomes throughout the trajectory of the criminal justice system. However, there is a short-lived positive impact on physical health, due to the basic health care provided in the carceral institution. These results point to the salience of exploring all levels of contact in order to fully ascertain how the criminal justice system impacts levels of stratification and disadvantage.

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