Beyond Absenteeism: Father Incarceration and its Effects on Children’s Development

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Abstract
High rates of incarceration among American men, coupled with high rates of fatherhood among men in prison, have motivated recent research on the effects of parental imprisonment on children’s development. We contribute to this literature using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to examine the effects of paternal incarceration on developmental outcomes for approximately 3,000 urban children. We estimate cross-sectional and longitudinal regression models that control not only for fathers’ basic demographic characteristics and a rich set of potential confounders, but also for several measures of pre-incarceration child development and family fixed effects. We find that paternal incarceration significantly increases children’s externalizing problems at age five, and some evidence that incarceration increases attention problems. The effects of paternal incarceration are stronger than the effects of other forms of father absence, suggesting that children with incarcerated fathers may require specialized support from caretakers, teachers, and social service providers. The effects are also stronger for children who lived with their fathers prior to incarceration, but are significant for children of nonresident fathers, suggesting that incarceration places children at risk through family hardships including and beyond parent-child separation.