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EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES, RACIAL ISOLATION AND ADULT  
IMPRISONMENT RISK AMONG U.S. BIRTH COHORTS SINCE 1910

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **Background**

- Most prior research on incarceration rates has explored the effects of macro-level economic, political, and demographic variables, including unemployment, economic inequality, electoral cycles, welfare spending, and race relations.
- By contrast, we use previously unreleased U.S. census data that includes prison inmates to examine the impact of educational resources (measured as student/teacher ratios) and racial isolation (measured as proportion of white students) in the states where individuals attended elementary and secondary school on their subsequent imprisonment risk as adults.
- While we could identify no prior research that uses census data to examine connections between state-level educational resources or racial isolation in schools on individual imprisonment risk, there are sound theoretical reasons to expect such links.
- Prior research has demonstrated connections between a variety of educational variables and criminal behavior and criminal justice outcomes, including imprisonment.
- Educational variables have also been shown to affect outcomes such as occupational status and earnings, which are in turn likely to affect criminal propensity and contacts with the criminal justice system.
- In this report we review the connections between incarceration and educational experiences and then consider the two major research questions we raised in the original grant application:

- First, how are levels of state resources devoted to education at the time children and juveniles were educated related to their individual imprisonment risk as adults?
- And second, how is the proportion of white students in the states where African Americans are educated related to black individual-level adult imprisonment risk?

### **Educational Resources and Imprisonment Risk**

- Based on prior research, we developed three competing models to explain the expected impact of state-level spending on the individual risk of imprisonment for adults:
  - An educational resource model assumes that schools can be a critical defining moment in the lives of individuals and predicts that educational spending will directly reduce individual incarceration risk for all students.
  - By contrast, educational skeptics take the position that the propensity to commit crime is relatively fixed at an early age and therefore educational spending will have little or no impact on criminal propensity or adult incarceration risk.
  - A gatekeeper model of educational attainment focuses on the processes by which secondary education sorts juveniles into stratified adult roles, including the highly stigmatized roles associated with imprisonment.
- While a gatekeeper model acknowledges that increasing school resources will lower imprisonment risk, it also raises the possibility that well funded schools are

more efficient at moving educational successes into the workforce and educational failures into prisons.

### **Racial Isolation and Imprisonment Risk**

- Following the landmark *Brown v Board of Education* decision in 1954, most research on the impact of school desegregation on African Americans has emphasized its short-term psychological effects.
- But beginning in the late 1970s, researchers began to consider longer-term impacts of racial isolation in schools for African Americans on a variety of more social-structural outcomes, including occupational attainment, college attendance, and occupational aspirations.
- While researchers are beginning to investigate the impact of racial isolation in schools on positive life experiences such as educational and occupational attainment, little research to date has explored the possibility that reducing the isolation of blacks in schools might also reduce the risk of subsequent negative life experiences such as crime and imprisonment.
- This is a potentially important oversight because prior research has linked integration to a wide range of variables that may in turn, be expected to influence imprisonment risk, including adult earnings, educational attainment, adult interaction patterns, and school success.

### **Data and Methods**

- We test the effects of educational resources and racial isolation on incarceration risk by building on methods recently developed by labor economists Card and Krueger.

- Card and Krueger used U.S. census data to test the effects of state-level educational resource investment on labor market outcomes by assigning state-level, cohort-specific educational characteristics to individuals based on the state in which they were born.
- But to control for differences in the return to education in different states, they estimated rates of return to schooling only on men who were educated in one state and then moved to another (i.e., interstate migrants).
- Following Card and Krueger, we use logistic regression with state-level fixed effects for both birth and residence state to calculate the likelihood of incarceration for adults who no longer reside in their birth state.
- Our research makes use of three waves of micro-level data on state prisoners and local jail inmates from the 1970, 1980, and 1990 U.S. censuses.
- Because they were not necessarily located in the same state where conviction and prior residence occurred, we exclude all federal prisoners from our analysis.
- We merge 16% micro-level census data on state and local prisoners with 5% samples of publicly released micro-level data on non-institutionalized individuals from the 1980 and 1990 U.S. censuses and two 1% samples from the 1970 census.
- We re-weighted data from the various samples to adjust sample densities to represent the population accurately.

### **Results for Educational Resources and Imprisonment Risk**

- Contrary to educational skeptics and in support of the educational resource model, we find that greater educational spending in high schools lowered individual incarceration risk for adults—especially for high school graduates.

- However, contrary to a simple educational resource model, high resource schools do not reduce the risk of all their students equally.
- As predicted by our school as gatekeeper model, high resource schools increase the fit between educational success and imprisonment risk: educational successes in high resource schools face a reduced risk of imprisonment while educational failures face an even higher risk of imprisonment than they would face in states that supply fewer educational resources to their high school students.
- Thus, while spending more on education reduced imprisonment risk in the aggregate, it also widened the gap between educational winners and losers.
- The implications of these findings for social policy are significantly more complicated than prescriptions suggesting increased educational funding as a simple – albeit expensive – antidote to crime.
- While increasing school resources will help in reducing the overall number of individuals prone to incarceration, it also likely has the unintended consequence of creating a group of educational failures that while potentially smaller in number are more highly at risk of incarceration.
- If educational resources alone do not reduce the imprisonment risk of high school dropouts, policy makers must consider simultaneously creating alternative mechanisms and programs to address these populations, particularly in states that invest more in their schools.
- Existing research suggests that vocational education and military service may have in part performed these functions in earlier periods.

- In short, increased resource investment requires that more, rather than less, attention be paid to the problem of what to do with individuals subject to educational failure.

### **Results for Racial Isolation and Imprisonment Risk**

- Our results show consistent support for the argument that when African Americans attended schools where there were on average a higher proportion of white students, their risk of subsequent adult incarceration was substantially reduced.
- Imprisonment risk for blacks increased exponentially when they were educated in schools where less than 30% of their classmates were white.
- Moreover, the effect of racial isolation on black imprisonment risk increased greatly over time: connections between racial isolation and imprisonment risk for African Americans were much stronger after the 1960s than in earlier years.
- If the results presented here are confirmed by additional research, it will be important to develop a better understanding of differences in the characteristics of black segregated schools before and after 1960.
- Given the challenges of historical research, it might also be strategic to study differences between academically successful and less successful black *de facto* segregated schools of today.
- In particular, it would be useful to examine differences in the school climate for more and less successful black segregated schools—both historically and contemporaneously.

- One possibility worth exploring is that racial isolation had less impact on imprisonment risk for blacks in earlier years because blacks attending racially isolated schools in more recent years are less likely to be in classrooms where there is strong order, a commitment to learning, and consistent school disciplinary practices.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

- Our results suggest that schools play a critical role in the subsequent life chances of individuals.
- It appears from these data that the individual risk of imprisonment is strongly affected by the state-level characteristics of the schools where the individual was born and that these effects follow individuals even when they change states.
- But while states that devote greater resources to education and provided more racially diverse schools reduced imprisonment risk in the aggregate, the findings were far from simple.
- In the case of educational resources, schools with more resources actually widened the gap between educational winners and losers.
- And we found that while black students educated in schools that had higher proportions of whites faced significantly lower incarceration risks in the aggregate, the connection between racial isolation and imprisonment risk for blacks grew steadily over time.
- Thus, while increasing school resources will help in reducing the overall number of individuals prone to incarceration, it also likely has the unintended

consequence of creating a group of educational failures that while potentially smaller in number, nevertheless face especially high incarceration risks.

- Our results also show that the connection between black racial isolation in schools and imprisonment risk has grown steadily over time
- In the face of unprecedented incarceration rates and increasingly shrill arguments over the social and monetary costs of specific educational policies, it is critical to have more definitive information on possible links between the characteristics of public education and the likelihood of adult incarceration.