



Children of the Prison Boom: Mass Incarceration and the Future of American Inequality (Studies in Crime and Public Policy)

Sara Wakefield, Christopher Wildeman

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An unrelenting prison boom, marked by stark racial disparities, pulled a disproportionate number of young black men into prison in the last forty years. In *Children of the Prison Boom*, Sara Wakefield and Christopher Wildeman draw upon broadly representative survey data and interviews to describe the devastating effects of America's experiment in mass incarceration on a generation of vulnerable children tied to these men. In so doing, they show that the effects of mass imprisonment may be even greater on the children left behind than on the men who were locked up.

Parental imprisonment has been transformed from an event affecting only the unluckiest of children—those with parents seriously involved in crime—to one that is remarkably common, especially for black children. This book documents how, even for children at high risk of problems, paternal incarceration makes a bad situation worse, increasing mental health and behavioral problems, infant mortality, and child homelessness. Pushing against prevailing understandings of and research on the consequences of mass incarceration for inequality among adult men, these harms to children translate into large-scale increases in racial inequalities. Parental imprisonment has become a distinctively American way of perpetuating intergenerational inequality—one that should be placed alongside a decaying public education system and concentrated disadvantage in urban centers as a factor that disproportionately touches, and disadvantages, poor black children.

More troubling, even if incarceration rates were reduced dramatically in the near future, the long-term harms of our national experiment in the mass incarceration of marginalized men are yet to be fully revealed. Optimism about current reductions in the imprisonment rate and the resilience of children must therefore be set against the backdrop of the children of the prison boom—a lost generation now coming of age.

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