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Who Benefits from Mass  
Incarceration? A Stratification  
Economics Approach to the  
“Collateral Consequences”  
of Punishment

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### Abstract

A rich empirical literature documents the consequences of mass incarceration for the wealth, health, and safety of Black Americans. Yet it often frames such consequences as a regrettable artifact of racially disproportionate criminal legal system contact, rather than situating the impetus and functioning of the criminal legal system in the wider context of White political and economic domination. Revisiting a quarter century of mass incarceration research through a stratification economics lens, we highlight how mass incarceration shapes Black–White competition for education, employment, and financial resources and contributes to Black–White disparities in well-being. Highlighting persistent research gaps, we propose a research agenda to better understand how mass incarceration contributes to systematic White advantage. To address mass incarceration’s consequences and transform the conditions of White political and economic domination under which



it arose, we call for legislative and judicial intervention to remedy White hyper-enfranchisement and reparations to eliminate the Black–White wealth gap.

## INTRODUCTION

Social scientists continue to declare that mass incarceration, a defining social force of the last half century, is on its way out (Clear & Frost 2013, Robey et al. 2023). Lifetime risks of imprisonment are indeed in decline, as are absolute and relative imprisonment risks for Black Americans (Robey et al. 2023). But whether we consider mass incarceration to be over, or even on its way out, depends a great deal on what we believe mass incarceration is and what it does.

Scholarship on the “collateral consequences” of mass incarceration (Hagan & Dinovitzer 1999), leaving concerns with political etiology to political scientists, is curiously absent a broader concept of how such consequences function (Beckett & Western 2001, Kirk & Wakefield 2018). Even as the field rigorously documents the vast social, political, economic, and health fallout of mass incarceration, it remains largely agnostic on a central theoretical concern: Do we conceive of mass incarceration as a policy mistake with negative consequences for us all, or as a well-running engine of racial stratification that has enriched some Americans at others’ expense? How we answer this question, or do not, has tremendous implications for how we study the harms of mass incarceration and what policy moves we deem capable of confronting it.

Scholarship on mass incarceration’s consequences is often introduced with reference to racial inequality (Haskins & Lee 2016). Such scholarship has identified an array of mechanisms by which mass incarceration appears to contribute to racial stratification, particularly through a long-standing line of inquiry on the disproportionate impact of incarceration-related constraints on Black men’s workforce participation, income, and wealth (Maroto 2015, Maroto & Sykes 2020, Western 2002, Zaw et al. 2016). Yet most such research frames these phenomena as an unfortunate artifact of racially disproportionate criminal legal system contact, rather than situating the impetus and functioning of the criminal legal system within a broader theory of structural racial inequality.

Critiquing the failure to engage questions of structural racism in empirical research on mass incarceration’s consequences, two of the field’s preeminent scholars argue,

While most studies that explore the consequences of mass incarceration for American families are motivated by racial inequality within the carceral system—rightfully so, given the massive racial disparities in incarceration rates and criminal justice involvement—the work often fails to engage this important issue in meaningful ways. . . . We neither interrogate why we see racial disparities in mass incarceration nor do we investigate why we might see racial disparities in outcomes due to mass incarceration. (Haskins & Lee 2016, pp. 225–26)

Indeed, with important exceptions (Lee & Wildeman 2013, Wildeman 2012b, Wildeman & Wang 2017, Zaw et al. 2016), collateral consequences research inventories the implications of mass punishment for individuals, neighborhoods, and nations rather than examining how a racially targeted punishment system functions within a broader set of national and subnational institutions that systematically privilege whiteness. Further, the possibility that mass incarceration produces systematic benefits, in addition to or even as an impetus for its systematic harms, receives very limited scholarly attention. Such research, if it aims to confront racial injustice, must “move beyond description of racial inequality [and] think critically about how our society’s raced institutions interact with one another to stratify the experiences of American families” (Haskins & Lee 2016, pp. 228–29).

Toward that end, the current review applies the theory of stratification economics to consider whether and how the broad criminalization and intensive punishment of Black Americans have advanced or advantaged their White contemporaries. First, the review briefly revisits key theoretical perspectives on the consequences of mass incarceration and proposes stratification economics as a meta-theoretical framework for understanding the production and functioning of those consequences. Next, it applies stratification economics to available social scientific evidence on the consequences of mass incarceration, analyzing the implications of that evidence for the relative standing of White Americans. Finally, the review advances an agenda for future research and policy capable of confronting and redressing the ill-gotten gains of mass incarceration.

## THEORETICAL ORIENTATION TO THE CONSEQUENCES OF MASS INCARCERATION

### Understanding “Collateral” Consequences of Mass Incarceration

Most scholarship on mass incarceration takes stock of its harms with the explicit intent of guiding their mitigation. Across a wide array of academic disciplines, this harm inventory project has been broadly taken up and tremendously fruitful. Empirical works on the harms of mass incarceration apply diverse methods—drawn variously from medicine, public health, psychology, demography, criminology, economics, geography, and other fields—while engaging richly with the evidence produced in other fields and disciplines.

Methodologically and substantively far-ranging empirical attentions have produced rapid advances in knowledge in just two decades, uncovering how incarceration affects education; employment, income, and wealth; housing; and physical health, safety, and well-being (Kirk & Wakefield 2018). Such work highlights how incarceration’s consequences ripple long past the term of imprisonment (Western 2002) and far beyond the incarcerated individual (Comfort 2007). Further, it is now possible to connect robust, population-level estimates of mass incarceration’s impact on American health and family life (e.g., Wakefield & Wildeman 2014, Wakefield et al. 2016, Wildeman & Wang 2017) with an ethnographer’s finely observed understanding of the qualitative mechanisms that underlie such harms (e.g., Comfort 2008, Rios 2011) and an emerging grasp of their tremendous economic value (McKay 2022a).

Playing well on the interdisciplinary field comes at a cost, however. Other bodies of scholarship on crime and the criminal legal system cohere around an identifiable set of core theoretical perspectives; a great deal of policing research, for example, engages with procedural justice theory or environmental (“broken windows”) theories. In contrast, much scholarship on the consequences of mass incarceration has a notably atheoretical bent. The subset of empirical studies that are theoretically driven—for example, studies applying theories of stress and family process to examine individual- and family-level consequences and those that apply social disorganization theory or the coercive mobility thesis to assess neighborhood-level consequences—tend to be cited more for their empirical than for their theoretical contributions. The unifying empirical thrust of such work is the finding that mass incarceration has certain “collateral consequences,” impacts that ripple beyond the imprisonment experience through time, physical space, and social ties. Yet, as previous reviews have noted, it has neither applied nor generated a unifying theoretical perspective on the central question of what “collateral consequences” are (Comfort 2007, Kirk & Wakefield 2018).

Developed in military ethics literature, the idea of collateral consequences pertained originally to the “incidental or unintentional (although perhaps foreseen)” damages caused by military operations (Lackey 1987, p. 264). The concept is grounded in an aspect of military ethics termed the Doctrine of Double Effect, “a way of reconciling the killing of innocents with lawful wartime operations” (Abbate 2014, p. 72). The Doctrine, a subject of ongoing controversy in military ethics,



rejects the intentional killing of noncombatants in wartime while condoning certain foreseeable casualties of noncombatants as inevitable in war. At the height of the so-called War on Drugs, Hagan & Dinovitzer (1999) applied the term in a foundational work on the reverberating impacts of mass incarceration among children and families, who have come to figure in subsequent scholarship as innocent noncombatants in a domestic crime war.

Consistent with the collateral consequences analogy and the military logic underlying it, scholarship on mass incarceration's consequences in Black communities tends to frame those consequences as unintended and regrettable casualties of an overly zealous campaign against crime—despite evidence of its racially driven inception and expansion (Petach & Pena 2021).<sup>1</sup> In this context, questions of the broader logic and functioning of such consequences in a society marked by White political-economic domination are relegated to a speculative aside.

### Economic Theories of Crime

Economic theory and research on crime and the criminal legal system highlight an alternative framework for examining the consequences of mass incarceration and criminal legal system policy at large: that is, as a system of costs and benefits.

Economic theories of crime and punishment begin from the premise that engaging in criminalized activity<sup>2</sup> is a matter of individual rational choice. Beginning with Becker (1968), this body of work has explored how to optimize criminal legal system investments to minimize the costs of criminalized behavior to society. Pointing out that public expenditures on crime control as of 1967 failed to produce concomitant benefits in averted social costs, Becker (1968, p. 170) proposed that “simply extend[ing] the economist’s usual analysis of choice” would make it possible to better calibrate crime-control strategies for optimal individual deterrence and increased social benefit. Successive work on the economics of crime has focused on identifying optimal strategies for constraining individual criminalized behavior and for minimizing the social and governmental costs of both “crime” and crime control regimes.

Yet Becker’s work raises a question that the succeeding field of research has not well answered: What explains the apparently irrational existence (and persistence) of a US criminal legal system that already appeared oversized and underperforming according to Becker’s 1967 data? Becker explicitly punts this question to political scientists, suggesting that the logic of political decision making is beyond the economist’s grasp. But is it?

Research on the economics of crime typically analyzes costs and benefits at two social levels: the individual and the society as a whole (Entorf et al. 2012). In concentrating the analysis of costs and benefits at these two levels, however, it does not consider whether or how “the economist’s usual analysis of choice” might also apply at the group level. In the context of US mass incarceration, at least, this is a critical omission.

<sup>1</sup>Former president Richard Nixon’s domestic policy advisor, John Ehrlichman, described the origins of the War on Drugs this way:

The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and Black people. You understand what I’m saying? We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or Black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and Blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.” (cited in Baum 2016)

<sup>2</sup>“Criminalized activity” is used here to highlight the fact that “crime” is contested and contextual; criminalizing certain behaviors (and not others) is a matter of political choice that is exercised toward a variety of ends.

Central to Americans' views and experiences of the criminal legal system is the knowledge that it doles out protection and punishment inequitably by racial group (Jackson et al. 2023, Prowse et al. 2019). Encounters with the criminal legal system, from arrest (Brame et al. 2014) to imprisonment (Western & Pettit 2010), are starkly uneven by race. Criminal legal system contact is so widespread, and so markedly targeted by racial group, that experiences like arrest have become measurably decoupled from engagement in criminalized activity (Weaver et al. 2019). As Kirk & Wakefield (2018, p. 176) put it in reviewing evidence on the consequences of mass imprisonment, "The disparate and repressive nature of collateral consequences reflects existing stratification patterns but also creates new inequalities." Thus, while an economic approach has much to offer research on crime and punishment, a theoretical framework that is capable of accounting for the consequences of mass incarceration must explicitly and convincingly address group-based inequality.

### Stratification Economics

Stratification economics is the foremost economic theory of inequality. It examines the role of structural mechanisms in creating and maintaining intergroup dominance and the social and material disparities that such dominance builds and perpetuates (Darity et al. 2015).

Stratification economics begins from the observation that aggregated individual characteristics have proven grossly inadequate for explaining the creation and persistence of intergroup inequality. Adjudicating a voluminous but underwhelming empirical literature focused on identifying potential genetic, cultural, pseudo-cultural, or behavioral influences on racial economic inequality, the theory refocuses explanatory attention on structural mechanisms—in particular, intergenerational transfers and exclusionary practices—as core drivers of stratification (Darity 2005, 2022).

On questions of racial disparity, which are central to the practice and consequences of US mass incarceration, stratification economics diverges in an important respect from the economics of crime and other neoclassical perspectives. Neoclassical economic approaches frame individual and systemic racial discrimination as irrationalities that will inevitably be overcome by market forces. Yet racial discrimination in the United States has persisted in the face of robust market forces, generating substantial economic benefit for dominant groups (Hamilton 2020). Taking heed of the evidence, stratification economics reconsiders racial discrimination as a rational and predictable group-based strategy for maintaining dominance and obtaining the associated economic and psychological benefits.

Research applying the framework has illuminated a diverse set of social and institutional strategies that dominant groups (particularly but not exclusively White Americans) use to maintain or extend their relative position and how those strategies produce and sustain group identity and intergroup inequality (Chelwa et al. 2022). The literature further highlights how material and psychological benefits of racial dominance function in mutually reinforcing ways. Indeed, "although DuBois refers to these advantages for working-class Whites as a 'psychological wage,' it is striking that the advantages he lists have ramifications for tangible, material benefits—particularly the influence exercised over the systems of criminal justice and electoral politics" (Darity 2022, p. 412).

Research on mass incarceration's etiology highlights the relevance of the stratification economics framework. Based on Becker's 1968 analysis, the neoclassical economics of crime perspective would predict that the irrationally high criminal legal system expenditures of 1967 would diminish until they reached a level at which the benefits and costs of crime control were better aligned. That is, of course, not what happened. Rather, public expenditures on crime control continued to increase, rising especially steeply from 1978 to 2008 (Clear & Frost 2013).



Stratification economics raises a different possibility: that intergroup competition could precipitate the rise of racially targeted incarceration in areas where White economic dominance was threatened. Consistent with this prediction, Petach & Pena (2021) found that US commuting-zone areas where White poverty rates more closely resembled non-White poverty rates saw steeper post-1970 increases in non-White incarceration.

In research on mass incarceration's consequences, too, stratification economics offers a divergent perspective. Whereas the (largely atheoretical) collateral consequences literature focuses on revealing mass incarceration's putatively unintended harms, and the economics of crime literature focuses on optimizing the crime control system, stratification economics highlights criminal legal system processes as potential tools of intergroup competition. From this perspective, the far-reaching social, political, and economic impacts of incarceration and the gross racial disparities in its imposition are not a side effect that can be minimized in a fundamentally well-intended system but a central characteristic of that system's functioning in a time of ongoing White political and economic domination.

## EFFECTS OF MASS INCARCERATION ON RELATIVE GROUP POSITION

Stratification economics offers an illuminating meta-theoretical framework for considering what we know and do not know about the nature and functioning of mass incarceration's consequences at multiple social-ecological levels and across multiple life domains. To date, however, the theory has seldom been applied to this work.

Revisiting a quarter century of evidence for mass incarceration's consequences through a stratification economics lens highlights how mass incarceration shapes intergroup competition for education, employment, and financial resources and contributes to Black–White gaps in well-being. Although much remains undone, current evidence suggests how mass incarceration's diverse “collateral” consequences may work in concert to bolster White political and economic dominance.

### Education and Labor Market Outcomes

A rich body of research demonstrates that mass incarceration advantages White Americans in competitive educational settings and job markets, though the economic benefits of these advantages have not been well quantified. Mass incarceration helps to produce White advantage in education and employment by depressing Black students' educational attainment, removing working-age Black men from the labor market, and putting Black men who remain in (or return to) the labor market at substantial hiring disadvantage. This section discusses evidence on each of these mechanisms in turn.

**Education.** Mass incarceration is, as legal system scholar Henning (2012, p. 387) puts it, “a childhood intervention.” It functions at the individual, community, and (racial) group levels to put Black children at a substantial competitive disadvantage in education. It does so by foreclosing educational opportunities for individual children of incarcerated parents; by damaging educational institutions in hyper-incarcerated communities; and by criminalizing Black children as a group, in and out of educational settings, in ways that interfere with learning.

**Parental incarceration.** Parental incarceration impedes young children's healthy cognitive development (Geller et al. 2012), diminishes their school readiness, and makes them more likely to be placed in special education (Haskins 2014). It also hinders cognitive skill-building and depresses children's school performance (Hagan & Foster 2012). Cognitive skills deficits attributable to disproportionate parental incarceration among Black children account for up

to 15% of the Black–White gap in educational achievement observed at age 9 (Haskins 2016). Paternal incarceration history is also associated with mothers' and fathers' lower home- and school-based educational involvement in elementary school (Haskins & Jacobsen 2017), which can further depress students' educational achievement.

Among older children, parental incarceration depresses academic performance (Murray et al. 2012). It reduces the likelihood of high school completion by one third (Mears & Siennick 2016) and also significantly reduces chances of obtaining a four-year college degree, with cascading negative effects on social and economic outcomes in adulthood (Foster & Hagan 2015).

**Concentrated community incarceration.** Even if their own parents are never incarcerated, children in hyper-incarcerated communities face substantial obstacles to learning. Controlling for the many other adversities already facing such children, those in neighborhoods with high incarceration rates evidence reduced memory and concentration, math problem-solving, and reading comprehension (Haskins & McCauley 2019).

School-level parental incarceration rates interact with children's own experiences of parental incarceration. Attending a school with a higher rate of parental incarceration lowers students' lifetime educational attainment substantially, even if they have not personally experienced parental incarceration. Personally experiencing parental incarceration and attending a higher-incarceration-rate school diminishes the likelihood of college completion by approximately 75% (Haskins 2017).

At the city level, aggressive policing strategies in low-income Black neighborhoods also interfere with children's ability to learn. Implementation of proactive policing practices (such as stop and frisk) that are known to target Black communities reduces Black male achievement scores in standardized testing (Legewie & Fagan 2019).

**Childhood criminalization.** The generalized association of Blackness and criminality that mass incarceration cultivates (Johnson 2011) further hinders Black children's learning. Beginning in preschool and continuing throughout their educational careers, Black children are disproportionately monitored and punished for problem behavior in putatively educational settings. Teachers train a heightened focus on tracking and disciplining Black boys (Downer et al. 2016, Gilliam et al. 2016). Further, teachers' entries in official academic records tend to set up Black male students for increasingly severe punishment, including contact with the criminal legal system (Parker 2017).

By age 23, 49% of Black men have been arrested, compared to 38% of White men (Brame et al. 2014). Even a single arrest puts young people at sharply increased risk of school dropout and lowers their chances of four-year college enrollment (Kirk & Sampson 2013). Experimental audit research demonstrates that students with a felony conviction history are 2.5 times more likely to be rejected from non-elite four-year colleges than comparable applicants without a felony record (Stewart & Uggen 2020).

**Workforce participation.** Incarceration and workforce participation (or nonparticipation) are thickly intertwined at the national and individual levels alike. US labor market conditions—including tenth-percentile wages, wage inequality, unemployment rate, and/or unemployment duration—effectively predict rising federal and state incarceration rates between 1980 and 2017 (Cantekin & Elgin 2020). Approximately one-third of all nonworking 30-year-old men in the United States are in jail or in prison or are unemployed, formerly incarcerated individuals (Looney & Turner 2018). In this broader context, mass incarceration appears to bolster the labor market advantage of White Americans relative to Black competitors at the individual and group levels by marking a large proportion of Black working-age men with felony records; by removing Black working-age men en masse from the labor market; and by promoting statistical discrimination against Black male job applicants, independent of individual conviction history.

**Marking.** In the context of racially targeted policing and criminal legal system processing, one-third of all adult Black men have a felony record, and 15% have spent time in prison, compared to 13% and 5.5%, respectively, of men in the general US male population (Shannon et al. 2017). White Americans' lesser exposures to felony conviction and imprisonment histories confer substantial advantages in the job market, which disqualifies individuals with felony convictions from many comparatively desirable jobs (Uggen & Stewart 2015). Within occupations that do not categorically exclude those with conviction histories, employers make extensive efforts to avoid hiring or even interviewing individuals with felony records (Travis et al. 2014, pp. 237–38; Uggen & Stewart 2015).

Experimental audit research reveals how racial discrimination and conviction-related discrimination interact to the advantage of White job candidates. Such studies find that White applicants are more likely to be called back than similar Black applicants, that applicants without felony convictions enjoy robust advantages over similar applicants without such convictions, and that the disadvantaging effect of a felony conviction is much larger for Black applicants than White (Pager 2003, Pager et al. 2009). White job seekers thus benefit simultaneously from racial discrimination and felony conviction-related discrimination against their Black competitors. Yet even minor contact with the criminal legal system, such as an arrest for a nonfelony crime that does not result in conviction, reduces the likelihood of employer callback during the job application process (Uggen et al. 2014).

**Removal.** For those at the other end of the punishment spectrum, who are convicted and imprisoned, prison time confers added disadvantage. Net of the effects of an associated conviction, prison time reduces later employment chances by 6–11% (Apel & Sweeten 2010, Geller et al. 2006) and cuts the number of years employed over the life course by one-third (Gordon et al. 2023). Such effects are likely a result of the competitive disadvantages produced by prolonged removal from the workforce, including the atrophy or irrelevance of previous job skills and the deterioration of social networks that promote connection to, and selection for, job opportunities (Visher 2017).

Shorter-term removal may also have hobbling effects on workforce participation and advancement. First, the time burdens of these legal system obligations—including probation and parole monitoring, court appearances, and preconviction jail time—interfere substantially with job attendance and job responsibilities, making job retention and advancement more difficult (Dobbie & Yang 2021). Second, the highly cyclical and highly disruptive nature of low-level criminal legal system contacts (Comfort 2016) may eventually drive some potential workers from the formal labor market altogether.

Finally, beyond the disadvantages conferred on those in direct contact with the criminal legal system (and the corresponding advantages enjoyed by their competitors), mass removal shapes the labor market on a broad scale. Challenging a neoclassical economic narrative attributing low US unemployment rates in the 1980s and 1990s to an “unregulated” labor market, Western & Beckett (1999) analyzed national trends in carceral spending, carceral population growth, and employment rates. Adjusting estimates to include incarcerated individuals reveals that mass incarceration artificially depressed US unemployment rates, particularly for Black men: “Total joblessness among black men. . . remained around 40% through recessions and economic recoveries” throughout the 1980s and 1990s (p. 1044).

**Statistical discrimination.** The White job market advantage fostered through mass incarceration does not accrue exclusively through the disadvantaging of Black applicants with felony convictions and incarceration histories. It also operates by reinforcing generalized perceptions of Black criminality that promote group-based statistical discrimination in hiring decisions concerning all Black applicants.



Broad and robust effects of the mass criminalization of Black men on Black–White labor market competition are documented in two experimental studies that test racial employment discrimination before and after the implementation of local initiatives aimed at reducing hiring discrimination against applicants with conviction histories (“ban the box”). Policies preventing employers from collecting conviction information on job applications exacerbate hiring discrimination against Black male applicants relative to White male counterparts (Agan & Starr 2018, Doleac & Hansen 2016).

The increased racial discrimination associated with presumed criminality drives down the population employment rates for young, “low-skilled” Black men by 3.4 percentage points after implementation of “ban the box” policies (Doleac & Hansen 2016). The association of Blackness with criminality, an intended outcome of “tough on crime” policies (Baum 2016), thus impedes formal labor market participation even among Black men with no connection to the criminal legal system.

**Earnings, job growth, and employer profit.** Beyond effects on workforce participation (discussed in the preceding section), mass incarceration’s consequences for labor market outcomes include effects on individual earnings, community-level job growth, and employer profit.

**Effects on earnings.** Mass incarceration contributes to the Black–White earnings gap by impinging on Black men’s job acquisition, retention, and wages. Net of a robust set of covariates, a history of incarceration depresses point-in-time wages by 14–26% (Geller et al. 2006). Prison time also disrupts linkages to stable, career employment in early adulthood, putting individuals with incarceration histories on different wage growth trajectories for the rest of their working years (Western 2002). As Western & Pettit (2010, p. 11) put it,

The high rate of incarceration [of Black men] has redrawn the pathway through young adulthood. The main sources of upward mobility for African American men—namely, military service and a college degree—are significantly less common than a prison record. For the first generation growing up in the postcivil rights era, the prison now looms as a significant influence on life chances.

Even among those who have spent time in prison, incarceration exerts a much sharper influence on long-term employment and wage trajectories for Black men than for White. In the years immediately after imprisonment, Black men are significantly less likely to be employed and have significantly lower earnings than their White counterparts, in part due to White men’s ability to leverage their social networks for post-incarceration employment (Western & Sirois 2017). Over the long term, Black men’s post-prison wages grow 21% more slowly than those of their White formerly incarcerated counterparts (Lyons & Pettit 2011). Although its precise magnitude remains unknown, scholars agree that the differential imprisonment of Black (versus White) men drives a substantial portion of Black–White gaps in wages (Western & Pettit 2005) and earnings (Gordon et al. 2023).

Nationally, the mass incarceration years have seen diminished workforce participation and stagnation in real median earnings, driven by sharp drops in labor market participation among non-White men and those with less formal education and a widening wage gap (Coile & Duggan 2019). By 2008, just 25% of Black men with limited formal education were employed, fewer than were in prison (Western & Pettit 2010). The US government has “made a large and coercive intervention into the labor market through the expansion of the penal system” (Western & Beckett 1999, p. 1030). Yet the implications of this intervention for the relative economic standing of White Americans remain largely unknown.

**Effects on local economic growth.** In rural communities, mass incarceration’s consequences have sometimes been touted as a potential economic benefit. Leaders of some rural communities

competed aggressively for prison siting in the belief that prison construction would stimulate economic growth in their communities. Yet extensive evidence demonstrates that these promises of job growth and prosperity were either short-lived or, in most instances, entirely unrealized (Eason 2017, Genter et al. 2013, Zhang 2023). Indeed, prison construction may even inhibit economic growth in rural counties, particularly when residents have lower levels of formal education (Hooks et al. 2010).

In urban communities of color, the hobbling effects of concentrated incarceration on educational and workforce achievement (Clear 2009) may weaken the ability of affected locales to compete for new employers and industries against other locales with lower rates of incarceration, and often predominantly White labor forces. Research on how local incarceration rates shape competition among localities for new employers (and associated job growth) remains scarce.

**Effects on corporate profit.** Although research on the labor market consequences of mass incarceration has focused primarily on how conviction and incarceration experience affect labor market outcomes, the growth of mass probation and parole—a defining characteristic of contemporary mass incarceration (Phelps 2020)—may have equally important labor market implications. At the end of 2016, the most recent year for which data are available, 3.7 million individuals were on probation, and 874,777 were on parole (Bonczar & Mulako-Wangota 2023).

Parolees and probationers are each typically mandated to find and maintain formal employment (Travis et al. 2014). They may accept unfavorable terms of employment, including low wages and poor working conditions, in response to the credible threat of incarceration (Zatz 2020). Violations of probation or parole conditions account for 45% of all prison admissions (CSG Justice Cent. 2019). In the contemporary United States, a boost to corporate profit achieved through broadly mandated low-wage employment would accrue primarily to White Americans: 86% of privately held businesses are White owned, accounting for 93% of all private business revenue (Leppert 2024), and White Americans own 89% of stocks in publicly traded US companies (Gallup 2023). However, this possibility has not been investigated in research on mass incarceration's consequences.

### Assets, Debts, and Household Wealth

Mass incarceration limits asset accumulation over the life course, promotes disadvantageous patterns of credit use, and exacerbates Black–White disparities in household wealth.

**Assets and debts.** Contact with the criminal legal system, visited disproportionately on young Black men, limits asset accumulation and fosters disadvantageous patterns of credit use. Individuals with any history of incarceration have 34% lower net worth and 76% fewer assets than similar individuals without incarceration experience (Maroto & Sykes 2020). At a family level, fathers who have been incarcerated in the last three years have far fewer assets—including assets in bank accounts, homes, and vehicles—than those without a recent incarceration, a deficit that also extends to the mothers of their children (Turney & Schneider 2016, p. 2086). Although the wealth-diminishing effect of incarceration extends across racial groups, it is worth noting that formerly incarcerated Black individuals have substantially lower wealth than their formerly incarcerated White and Latinx counterparts (Zaw et al. 2016).

Even low-level contact with the criminal legal system has serious implications for Black–White disparities in asset accumulation over the life course. Individuals who are ever arrested as youth [disproportionately Black boys (Brame et al. 2014)] have 20% fewer assets at age 20 than similar never-arrested youth. A history of juvenile arrest significantly depresses economic status at age 30, with those arrested as youth reporting 47% fewer assets and \$17,183 lower net worth than similar

peers (Siennick & Widdowson 2022). A single arrest cuts asset accumulation between the ages of 25 and 30 by more than half (Maroto & Sykes 2020).

Effects of criminal legal system contact on debt are complex and vary based on the type of debt and the type and timing of system contact. Individuals with a history of childhood arrest report 74% lower debt at age 30 than their unarrested counterparts (Siennick & Widdowson 2022), likely due to the diminished likelihood of incurring the student loan debt associated with a four-year college degree. But an incarceration between the ages of 25 and 30, net the effect of an associated conviction, is associated with greater debt burden, as well as poorer access to unsecured credit (Warner et al. 2021). For fathers, imprisonment and post-imprisonment employment difficulties often lead to the accumulation of massive child support debt (Haney 2022). Over the life course, individuals who have more cumulative contact with the criminal legal system in early adulthood (before age 30) accumulate greater high-cost debt (associated with consumption and emergencies) and lesser advantageous debt (associated with educational attainment or home ownership) (DeMarco et al. 2021). These effects of criminal legal system contact on debt patterns appear stronger in states with more punitive post-imprisonment legal sanctions (Warner et al. 2021).

**Household wealth.** Emerging empirical work on the local economic effects of racial criminalization on wealth suggests that mass incarceration is a substantial contributor to local Black–White household wealth disparities. Using Blinder–Oaxaca decomposition to test differences in household income and assets by race and household incarceration history, Russell and colleagues (2023) find large and statistically significant wealth differences between Black and White households and between White households with and without incarceration exposure, but not between Black households with and without incarceration exposure. They interpret their results as suggesting that

Black households, regardless of their incarceration history, bear the consequences of racial disparities in the criminal legal system. These findings are consistent with a world where gatekeepers (e.g., employers, landlords, banks, and so forth) associate race with criminality, and as a result, economic opportunities for Black households are limited. (Russell et al. 2023, p. 461)

Russell and colleagues do not directly test the implicit hypothesis that the association of Blackness with criminality, established through racial mass incarceration, drives the pattern of household wealth differences they observe. However, their interpretation of the decomposition results is bolstered by aforementioned evidence for increased anti-Black hiring discrimination when employers' access to conviction history information is constrained (Agan & Starr 2018, Doleac & Hansen 2016).

**Relative Well-Being.** Beyond its impact on intergroup economic competition, mass incarceration also contributes to Black–White disparities in the well-being of individuals, families, and communities. From a stratification economics perspective, these racial group differences in well-being matter insofar as they bear on objective or subjective measures of relative group standing. Certain aspects of well-being, such as health, can alter objective economic standing; for example, racial disparities in health may exacerbate economic disparities through differential distribution of health care debt and health-related barriers to employment. Other aspects of well-being, such as violence and safety, may shape perceived group standing by telegraphing social messages about whose lives matter and whose do not. This section briefly reviews evidence on mass incarceration's consequences for Black–White disparities in well-being.

**Effects on disparities in family well-being.** Black families are disproportionately subjected to the strain and fallout of mass jailing and imprisonment. Fully 30% of Black women have experienced

the incarceration of a spouse or partner (Enns et al. 2019). Incarceration promotes intimate relationship dissolution and divorce (Apel 2016, Khan et al. 2011, Lopoo & Western 2005, Massoglia et al. 2011). Causal research on incarceration and partner violence is scarce, but early research finds that partners of formerly incarcerated men face sharply elevated risk of abuse (Hairston & Oliver 2011, McKay 2022b).

One in four Black children experience parental incarceration, usually paternal incarceration, before they reach age 14 (Wildeman 2009). Paternal incarceration reduces fathers' contact with their children (Geller 2013) and weakens fathers' financial support for their children (Geller et al. 2011). It also puts children at increased risk of physical abuse, neglect, and harsh parenting by their mothers (Turney 2014b, Wakefield 2015). Paternal incarceration predisposes the household to severe material hardship (Schwartz-Soicher et al. 2011) and debt (Harris et al. 2010). Fathers' incarceration also disrupts housing stability for their children's mothers (Geller & Franklin 2014) and increases the risk of child homelessness (Wildeman 2014).

**Effects on physical and mental health disparities.** Mass incarceration has far-ranging health consequences for individuals, families, and communities and contributes in known and yet-unknown ways to racial health disparities at the national level (Wildeman & Wang 2017). For directly affected individuals, incarceration exacerbates risk for stress-related physical and mental health conditions (Massoglia & Pridemore 2015) and has long-term ramifications for self-reported physical and mental health after return from incarceration and at midlife (Kim 2015, Schnittker et al. 2012).

Negative effects on health extend beyond incarcerated individuals into their families and households. Parental incarceration puts children at heightened risk for a host of physical health conditions (Turney 2014a) as well as attentional problems and internalizing and externalizing behavior (Geller et al. 2012, Murray et al. 2012, Wildeman 2010). Experiencing the incarceration of one's co-parent or partner compromises women's cardiovascular health (Lee et al. 2014), increases their chances of a major depressive episode (Wildeman et al. 2012), and puts them at higher risk for a range of other stress-related health behaviors and conditions (Wildeman et al. 2013).

At the neighborhood level, aggressive and intrusive policing practices, overwhelmingly trained on neighborhoods of color, corrode residents' physical (Sewell & Jefferson 2016) and mental (Sewell et al. 2016, Turney 2020) health. Living in a neighborhood with a high incarceration rate puts non-incarcerated residents at greater risk of depression and anxiety (Hatzenbuehler et al. 2015) and puts non-incarcerated Black residents at greater risk of cardiovascular problems (Topel et al. 2018). The forced churning of incarcerated men in and out of their households and communities is also associated with increased HIV prevalence among Black residents of heavily incarcerated communities (Johnson & Raphael 2009). For mothers, the incarceration of a son diminishes physical and psychological health (Green et al. 2006, Sirois 2020).

Nationally, mass incarceration is a major driver of Black–White health disparities. Racially disproportionate paternal incarceration accounts for 19% of the Black–White infant mortality gap and 7% of the Black–White disparity in total life expectancy at birth (Wildeman 2012a). Mass incarceration has widened Black–White disparities in children's internalizing and externalizing problems by up to 45% and 26%, respectively (Wakefield & Wildeman 2011).

**Effects on disparities in safety and violence.** The uneven distribution of safety and violence by race is a hallmark of US mass incarceration. Police figure as a threat to safety and quality of life for those presumptively criminalized on the basis of perceived race but may serve as “catchall service providers” and a desirable “commodity” among the White and affluent (Bell 2020, p. 968). In urban communities of color across the United States, subjective experiences of public safety are overwhelmingly defined by a single paradox: that police are oppressively, intrusively present to

monitor and punish trivial violations but unresponsive or unavailable when residents are in danger (Prowse et al. 2019). Among Black and White Americans alike, the perception that police over-punish and under-protect Black communities fundamentally erodes police legitimacy (Jackson et al. 2023).

Quantitative research on the consequences of mass incarceration for public safety in Black communities suggests that police killings of unarmed civilians inhibit Black residents from calling 911 (Desmond et al. 2020, Pearson & Timberlake 2023). Further, the forced cycling of residents between prison and community in hyper-incarcerated neighborhoods has a range of corrosive effects (Roberts 2003) that may in turn expose residents to greater violence and other forms of socially destructive behavior (Drakulich et al. 2012, Harding et al. 2019, Kirk 2015). But the influence of mass incarceration on racial disparities in community violence exposure remains unquantified.

## ASSESSING IMPLICATIONS FOR WHITE POLITICAL-ECONOMIC ADVANTAGE

The evidence reviewed here figures mass incarceration as a major potential engine of White political and economic advantage through simultaneous and synergistic effects across life domains and social-ecological levels. The racial maldistribution of criminal legal system contact and the nature of its complex consequences appear as substantial drivers of Black–White disparities in educational and labor market outcomes; assets, debts, and wealth; and individual, family, and community well-being.

The direction of these influences—disadvantaging Black Americans and advantaging their White counterparts—is clear, consistent, and systematic. Yet mass incarceration’s role in bolstering White economic advantage in the United States has remained largely unmeasured and unnamed.

### Summary of Gaps and Shortcomings

Social scientific research on mass incarceration has generated a rich understanding of its social, economic, political, and bodily consequences and, in some cases, revealed the magnitude of (and mechanisms for) those consequences. The field continues to grapple with certain long-standing, widely recognized methodological challenges: Distinguishing disadvantages that arise from criminal legal system contact from the disadvantages that precipitate it remains difficult, as does reconciling differences in findings (particularly on consequences for employment and earnings) between studies using official records and those using survey reports (Kirk & Wakefield 2018, Travis et al. 2014). As prior scholars have noted, these challenges merit continued attention.

Yet viewing the assembled evidence through a stratification economics lens highlights an altogether different set of challenges. Foremost among them is the field’s enduring inattention to the likelihood that mass incarceration generates benefits and competitive advantages for White Americans. By removing hundreds of thousands of economically vulnerable Black men from counts of unemployment, earnings, and almost every other federal statistical data source used to track inequality, mass incarceration has effectively masked the overwhelming persistence of Black–White inequality in the post–civil rights era (Pettit 2012). In the context of fairness- and merit-centered discourses over equal access to education and employment (e.g., Crosby & VandeVeer 2000), this distortion is instrumental.

When systematically advantaged White Americans compete successfully on their putative merits, the broader capital of Whiteness is enhanced (Chelwa et al. 2022, Vijaya et al. 2015), while the structural disadvantages faced by their Black counterparts are effectively essentialized through the association with criminality. Thus, it is critical that research on mass incarceration’s consequences more explicitly interrogate the role the criminal legal system plays in the manufacture of White advantage.



### Quantifying Mass Incarceration's Contributions to White Advantage

During the heyday of mass incarceration, the median wealth of Black households fell 75%, whereas that of White households rose 14% in a mere three decades (Asante-Muhammad et al. 2017). Current evidence does not address the extent to which mass incarceration is implicated in these stark figures, although its known consequences have wrought at least \$7.16 trillion in estimable damage to Black individuals, families, and communities (McKay 2022a).

To date, social scientists have trained limited empirical attention on the possibility that the human and financial resources siphoned from Black communities by mass incarceration have not evaporated but been redirected. Rigorously assessing the potential gains, benefits, and advantages that mass incarceration's consequences may have produced for White Americans represents a top priority for future research. As summarized in the current review, evidence for mass incarceration's known consequences suggests that potential gains might include direct monetary benefits, such as higher wages or payment for services; competitive advantages likely to confer monetary benefits, such as enhanced standing in competition for postsecondary education placements and employment; other nonmonetary benefits of tangible value, such as health, safety, and family well-being; and intangible benefits, such as the gains to subjective well-being associated with perceived group standing.

A focal concern for research on mass incarceration and White economic domination is the Black–White wealth gap, the authoritative measure of accumulated Black–White economic inequality in the United States (Darity et al. 2022). As the introduction and conclusion sections of countless manuscripts attest, a preponderance of scholarship is motivated by the desire to understand and confront the implications of racial criminalization for racial stratification and disparity. But most such research has not been designed to surface how intensive, intergenerational incarceration of Black Americans (Yi 2023) helps to maintain centuries-old disparities in health, wealth, and life chances.

Notable exceptions, concentrated in work on parental incarceration and child outcomes (e.g., Haskins 2016, Wakefield & Wildeman 2014), offer a strong model for future research to quantify mass incarceration's contributions to Black–White disparity. Applying robust counterfactual methods with data from probability-based samples, such studies have been able to quantify mass incarceration's contribution to the relative advantages afforded White Americans in infant mortality, child behavioral health, and early educational achievement. Future research would ideally deploy similar approaches, quantifying the extent of contemporary White advantage in educational attainment and the labor, housing, and credit markets and estimating the portion of that advantage associated with consequences of mass incarceration. Such work should pay particular attention to the potential effect on workforce participation and advancement of episodic absences associated with low-level criminal legal system contact, including arrest, jail stays, and probation and parole monitoring.

Another central priority for future research on mass incarceration's implications for White economic domination is to assess whether and how the removal of a labor market “surplus” population—Black men facing high risk of unemployment—has affected White labor market outcomes and employer profit margins. The implications have been sharply theorized (Darity 1990, Ruggiero 2017, Shammass 2019) but rarely investigated empirically. Quantifying the national and local impacts of racially targeted population removal (and redeposition) on White employer profits and White labor market outcomes represents a critical priority for stratification economics–informed scholarship in this area.

Relatedly, the benefits to White business owners and shareholders derived through access to low-cost, coerced or compulsory labor from those mandated to low-paid wage labor by probation

and parole conditions are largely unknown. Although a small empirical literature considers (and largely dismisses) the economic significance of prison labor and for-profit prisons [which hold 8% of US prisoners (Budd 2023)] in US racial stratification (see Wacquant 2010), the economic effects of the much more widespread practice of legally mandated low-wage employment merit greater attention.

Finally, future research should continue to build an understanding of how mass incarceration's consequences across multiple life domains interact with one another, and with the (equally consequential) workings of other US systems and institutions, to perpetuate White economic domination. Exploring mass incarceration's linked implications for White economic and political domination is particularly important in light of emerging evidence on its role in maintaining disproportionate White political influence (Remster & Kramer 2023) and the disproportionate political power (and public service allocation) afforded US rural communities over urban ones (Thorpe 2015, Walker et al. 2017). Existing works that connect the functioning of prison systems to that of educational institutions (e.g., Haskins 2017, Haskins & Jacobsen 2017) and financial institutions (Ginapp et al. 2023, Warner et al. 2021) offer a promising model for revealing how US social, economic, and political systems can interact to produce or disrupt White advantage.

## CONCLUSIONS

Stratification economics offers a useful meta-theory of the problem of US mass incarceration and its not-so-collateral consequences. Deployed within this framework, scholarship on the consequences of mass incarceration will surface a more precise, more actionable understanding of the criminal legal system: as a system inextricable from other advantaging and disadvantaging institutions, in which White "privilege" is neither a passive inheritance nor an accidental by-product but actively and continually produced.

Stratification economics casts in a new light the mass incarceration-related policy recommendations that have arisen from theoretically agnostic empirical work on mass incarceration's consequences. Even the most laudably far-reaching of such recommendations tend to focus on restoring the criminal legal system to more optimal functioning (Beckett 2018, Frost & Clear 2009, Tonry 2014). Such work reflects an unstated premise that starkly racialized patterns of criminal legal system functioning and impacts are an irregularity that can be resolved by optimizing the system for rational (and presumably race-neutral) functioning and reducing its universally negative consequences for those whose lives it touches (Nellis 2021).

In contrast, grassroots advocacy focused on confronting racial harm in the criminal legal system frames social justice, not more rational functioning of the system, as its core objective. Work in this vein views the criminal legal system as working in concert with inequitable systems of finance, housing, education, and employment to maintain White domination. The policy demands that arise from such an analysis—chiefly, reparations to Black communities and the abolition of policing and punishment (Mov. Black Lives 2020)—differ radically from the reforms inspired by an understanding of mass incarceration's harms as incidental. This contrast highlights how the theoretical agnosticism of empirical work on mass incarceration's consequences, particularly regarding the broader context of racial domination, foreshortens the critical vision of scholars who aspire to confront its racial harms.

Stratification economics suggests that criminal legal system reforms that occur in the context of ongoing White political-economic dominance are likely to be superficial (as in police retraining or modest sentencing reforms) or to shift its form but not its function in racial resource transfer (as in diversion efforts that redirect criminalized individuals from incarceration into equally punishing and extractive forms of community supervision). Indeed, even the most



radical of proposals for criminal legal system reform—for example, defunding the police and abolishing incarceration—would not reverse its material consequences nor alter the conditions of White political-economic domination under which it arose. From this perspective, declarations of mass incarceration’s demise are enormously premature, not simply because reductions in racially targeted criminal legal system contact are modest relative to the scale of preceding increases (Phelps 2020, Robey et al. 2023) but because the system’s profound impacts on racial advantage and disadvantage in the United States remain entrenched and unredressed (Whitlock & Heitzeg 2021).

To truly end mass incarceration, the fundamental remaking of US public safety systems must be accompanied by judicial intervention to address White hyper-enfranchisement and the systematically White-favoring political decision making that is its logical result. Judicial bodies must curtail the ability of state legislatures to impinge on proportional representation through racial gerrymandering and felon disenfranchisement (Natl. Conf. State Legis. 2023, Remster & Kramer 2023). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, a federal reparations initiative sufficient to close the Black–White wealth gap is long overdue (Darity & Mullen 2020). Reparations are foundational to addressing the conditions of overwhelming White economic dominance under which mass incarceration arose, and to which it has contributed mightily.

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