

**Book Review: Sara Wakefield and Christopher Wildeman, *Children of the Prison Boom: Mass Incarceration and the Future of American Inequality*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014. ISBN: 9780190624590 (Paperback). 231 pages. \$26.95.**

Reviewed by Robert J. Durán<sup>1</sup>

[Article copies available for a fee from The Transformative Studies Institute. E-mail address: [journal@transformativestudies.org](mailto:journal@transformativestudies.org) Website: <http://www.transformativestudies.org> ©2018 by The Transformative Studies Institute. All rights reserved.]

This book review originated from the mindset of a skeptic. What could two researchers, obtaining doctoral degrees from primarily white institutions, know about prison? Was there something in their background or families to know about this experience and the harm it might cause to children? *Children of the Prison Boom* is not that book of intimate knowledge or personal insight of living behind bars or growing up with a parent incarcerated, but instead it's the work of detached, objective, researchers attempting to use the best quantitative and qualitative data available to examine the impact of prison incarceration on children. The book begins with the story of two young African American boys born in the early 1990s to single mothers and whose fathers were in prison. One of the boys overcame the obstacles (Michael) of having a father in prison, and the other boy (Nathaniel) had a life characterized by chaos: problems in school and eventually serving time in a juvenile detention facility. The authors situate these stories into the period since the 1970s when the incarceration rate grew six-fold resulting in the United States having the highest incarceration rate in the world. The authors examine in particular how incarceration disproportionately impacted African Americans compared to whites. For example, one in

---

<sup>1</sup> **Robert J. Durán** is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Tennessee. His areas of research concerns racism in the post-civil rights era and community resistance, from gang evolution and border surveillance to disproportionate minority contact and officer involved shootings. He is the author of *Gang Life in Two Cities: An Insider's Journey* (2013) and his forthcoming book is *The Gang Paradox: Inequalities and Miracles on the U.S.-Mexico Border*, both published by Columbia University Press.

four African American children born in the 1990s experienced the incarceration of a father, and one in two with fathers who “dropped out” of high school. For whites, one in thirty had a father incarcerated, and one in twenty-five for children whose fathers dropped out. The eight chapters provided in this book highlight the harm not for prisoners but instead for their children: “a lost generation now coming of age” (p. 25). In this book review, I will highlight several empirical contributions obtained from the findings, provide some critiques regarding the policy suggestions that reflect a detached standpoint and a lack of a theoretical analyses that includes race and gender, and re-examine some omissions of maternal incarceration and the experience of Latinos/as.

First, the contributions of this book. If you need a research citation on the harms of paternal imprisonment for children, this book is excellent! The reason for focusing on children was based on research literature that found due to disadvantages already experienced by those who were incarcerated the consequences for inequality are primarily felt by the children. Wakefield and Wildeman begin by first outlining the social patterning of paternal imprisonment and then empirically test the impact that paternal incarceration is having on children by looking at issues such as before and after incarceration, mental health and behavioral problems, infant mortality, child homelessness, and then overall child inequality. Chapter Two, titled the social patterning of parental imprisonment, highlights the substantial change in the number of children experiencing a parent incarcerated. These rates were much higher for black youth, fathers, and for individuals not completing high school. The impact incarceration has on child wellbeing is highlighted in Chapter Four. The authors analyze a variety of mental health and behavioral problems listed as internalizing, externalizing, physical aggressiveness, and total behavior problems. The data source was the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN) and the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing (FFCW). In each of the categories studied, paternal incarceration impacted children 30 to 44 percent more than children without an incarcerated father. To estimate the effect, the researchers utilize several tests such as propensity score matching, fixed effect or within-person change models, placebo regression, and with a sample of men who have been incarcerated before. All four of the regression modeling strategies found relatively consistent results. In the words of the authors, “As the results to this point have demonstrated, across all age groups, paternal incarceration increased mental health and behavioral problems in children” (p. 93).

Chapters Five and Six examine the rarer events of infant mortality and

child homelessness, but test whether paternal incarceration could be contributing to these social problems. Regarding infant mortality, Wakefield and Wildeman emphasize how the United States has higher rates than other developing countries and these rates have vast disparities between blacks and whites. To test the effects of imprisonment on infant mortality the authors use the Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System (PRAMS) data. The results find that paternal incarceration increased the odds of infant mortality by 40 percent whereas maternal smoking has been found to increase the odds of infant death by 46 percent. If the father was abusive to the mother, his incarceration decreased the odds their infants would die by 17 percent. In terms of homelessness, only one prior research study had tested whether parental incarceration increased the risk of this experience. The authors use the FFCW data to examine this issue. They find that recent parental incarceration increased the risk of child homeless which was primarily concentrated among black children. Maternal incarceration was found to result in a greater risk for the child to be placed in foster care.

As I was reading this book, it required me to reflect a lot on my own family and friends whose stories I have outlined in my previous work. For instance, I thought about how I grew up observing four of my five brothers experience imprisonment and a sister incarceration through varying periods of their lives while my nephews and nieces often lived without a biological parent present. Neither of my nephews or nieces went to prison themselves and they have grown up to be good citizens, but this book has made me think about the impact, often not discussed in a family, that it has had upon their lives. I too faced life chances for incarceration that would have left my young daughter without a father. Would her life have been better off without me? Ironically, my experience growing up observing the experience of having an incarcerated parent with my nephews and nieces influenced me to strive towards not repeating this pattern and instead pursue school. However, there were still those many moments where being in the wrong place at the wrong time could have altered my life and the life of my children.

Rather than supporting the assumption of parents in prison are simply bad; Wakefield and Wildeman provide empirical support in Chapter Four that incarcerating the father did not necessarily make the situation better, and on average made a “bad situation worse.” Typically, inmates could be considered “...inconsistent parents, often with drug problems... (p. 69), but they often valued their role as fathers. Fathers were heterogenous in their role as parents. The one exception were fathers who were abusive and removing these individuals from the home often

made things better, but this was small proportion of fathers due to inmates of today being less serious offenders than in the past. The data analyzed to support these findings were based on the quantitative data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing (FFCW) study and longitudinal qualitative data collected from 2004 to 2006 involving 34 children with an incarcerated parent and twenty-one caregivers. The qualitative data found that many of the children described good relationships with their fathers and tended to idealize them. The fathers' incarceration impacted children economically by removing their financial ability to contribute towards the family and by reducing future income due to the legal debt that results in trying to maintain contact (i.e., phone calls, packages, letters, and visits). The father's incarceration often resulted in marital dissolution and in response new romantic relationships.

To sum up all the points, Wakefield and Wildeman estimate the increase in black-white disparities in child well-being due to incarceration in Chapter Seven. They find small effects for some outcomes such as total behavior problems and more pronounced effects in the risk of child homelessness. The authors believe that the largest effects of mass imprisonment rate may be yet to come as it "...portends the creation a new underclass" (p. 148).

As pointed out in this review, I was impressed with most of this book, but my critique begins in the last section provided in the conclusion titled "undoing the damage." Rather than suggesting a "dreary picture" the authors think social and criminal justice policies can be implemented to diminish the long-term consequences. First, they suggest "...we focus on policies that would help all vulnerable children, not just those who have a parent in prison" (p. 159). After reading 158 pages of the book before reaching this statement, I was left baffled. The entire book was built on the idea that the social patterning of parental imprisonment was not an equally shared experience by race, gender, and education. In particular, African Americans, males, and those who did not complete high school were disproportionately impacted. Bonilla-Silva (2017) in his book *Racism without Racists* argues that one of central frames of color-blind racism, abstract liberalism, rationalizes racial unfairness in the name of equal opportunity. Thus, one of the reasons why blacks continue to experience racial inequality is because the solutions do not address these disparities and instead emphasizes universal policies. Thus, Wakefield and Wildeman fall into the ideology of color-blind racism by offering a suggestion of change that does not address the points they have made throughout this book. The second solution they propose includes

advances in policing, but this section reads a little unclear because they use New York City as a model while not seeming to be aware of the literature that has highlighted the problematic policing strategies used in this city and its constitutional challenges. The authors do not cite the significant number of research studies which have highlighted the challenges between police and the African American community that will not be addressed by the authors suggesting we have more police officers on the streets or by using hot-spot policing. The final solution proposed was to address the issue of crime particularly in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods which could be urban, suburban, or rural. Again, the universal approach seems to offer the most promise for the authors which in the end highlights to me their detached standpoint to the issues they are describing and how the book would benefit from a theoretical analysis that included race and gender. This book does not use a theory to explain the findings and this omission becomes clear in the policy suggestions.

There were several points of the imprisonment experience for which Wakefield and Wildeman were unable to address in this book, primarily due to the data limitations for quantitative analyses. The two that stood out most to me were maternal incarceration and Latino/a incarceration. In terms of gender, the authors emphasized how men were imprisoned fourteen times the rate of women. They wrote, “The rate of women’s imprisonment has increased substantially in recent decades, but the experience remains rare, even among the most disadvantaged families; and it simply does not occur at levels high enough to drive social inequality in a meaningful way...” (p. 8) Another review I came across by Hagan and Foster (2015:1559) outlined the importance of this book, but also noted that such work should not neglect the gendered pathways of incarceration that includes “*both* mothers and fathers.” These authors encouraged researchers to not neglect the experience of maternal incarceration and despite occurring less frequently may influence other forms of inequality that may not be quantifiable in the same manner but still worthy of research. In terms of Latinos/as there was very little written. Wakefield and Wildeman noted this omission of what is now considered the largest minority group in the United States, nearly 18 percent of the population, due to the starkest difference between blacks and whites and how “Hispanics” were inconsistently classified. The inclusion of Latinos/as who could be of either racial group (White, Black, or Other), may heighten the divergence between blacks and whites and provide greater insight into the role of immigration detention centers. A topic worthy of future research.

Overall, *Children of the Prison Boom* contributes new insights for scholars and policy makers looking to understand the impact that mass incarceration is having on children. The analyses of quantitative data sources FFCW, PHDCN, and PRAMS and some qualitative research provide a strong empirical foundation. As a society we must grapple with reasons behind why the incarceration rate grew six-fold since the 1970s and why it disproportionately has targeted African Americans, men, and individuals lacking a high school education. The results are many more children of today growing up without fathers and experiencing greater rates of inequality that will increase future obstacles in life. The book becomes weaker, when the detached standpoint of the authors, offer universal policy approaches that lack a theoretical orientation to deal with legalized and social practices which have kept African Americans historically marginalized in U.S. society. Books on maternal incarceration or other racial and ethnic groups beyond the black-white binary will need to consult other research studies.

## **REFERENCES**

- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. 2018. *Racism without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Hagan, John and Holly Foster. 2014. "Review of *Children of the Prison Boom: Mass Incarceration and the Future of American Inequality*, by Sara Wakefield and Christopher Wildeman. New York. Oxford University Press." *American Journal of Sociology* 120: 1557-1559. <https://doi.org/10.1086/679754>