

# Poverty Research Flash

## Highlighting New Poverty Research

Lee, Hedwig, Tyler McCormick, Margaret T. Hicken, and Christopher Wildeman. 2015. "Racial Inequalities in Connectedness to Imprisoned Individuals in the United States." *DuBois Review* 12(1): 1-14.

Hedwig Lee is an Associate Professor and Tyler McCormick is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Washington. Margaret T. Hicken is a Faculty Associate with the Population Studies Center at the University of Michigan, and Christopher Wildeman is an Associate Professor of Policy Analysis and Management (PAM) in the College of Human Ecology at Cornell University.

The West Coast Poverty Center's **POVERTY RESEARCH FLASH** highlights new research by faculty affiliates and others on causes, consequences, and effective policy responses to poverty, with an emphasis on changing labor markets, demographic shifts, family structure, and social and economic inequality.

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## Racial Inequalities in Connectedness to Imprisoned Individuals in the United States

**Background.** The high rates of incarceration and racial disparities in incarceration in the US are well-documented. In addition to adverse consequences for individuals who are incarcerated, research has shown that incarceration negatively affects prisoners' children and their families. Incarceration rates for Black men, especially Black men with low levels of education, are particularly high, putting the children of Black men at the highest risk for experiencing the negative effects of parental incarceration.

**Methods.** Previous estimates have suggested that there are Black-White differences in connectedness to prisoners, but the ability to fully assess connectedness has been limited by a lack of nationally-representative data with appropriate measures of ties to prisoners. Using data from the 2006 General Social Survey, WCPC Affiliate Hedwig Lee and colleagues Tyler McCormick, Margaret T. Hicken, and Christopher Wildeman produce national estimates of the number and percentage of Black and White men and women aged 18 and older who report having a family member, someone they trust, an acquaintance, or a neighbor in prison. The researchers are also able to estimate the share of one's social network that is in prison.

**Findings.** The extent of connectedness to incarcerated individuals depends on how connectedness is measured. Although rates of connectedness vary across the measures and types of ties the researchers examined, a pattern emerges in which Blacks are more likely to be connected to incarcerated individuals and to have a larger share of their social networks incarcerated relative to their White counterparts. For example, 44 percent of Black women and 32 percent of Black men reported having at least one family member in prison, compared with 12 percent of White women and 6 percent of White men. In addition, Black men and women who know a prisoner are more likely than White men and women who are connected to a prisoner to know multiple prisoners. When looking at disparities across social networks, the researchers estimate that a Black man with an average-sized social network knows an average of 1.87 prisoners, while a White woman with an average-sized social network knows an average of 0.31 prisoners.

This analysis suggests that the "spillover effects" of mass incarceration reach deeper than might be expected given the proportion of the population that is incarcerated, and they reach particularly deep into Black communities. The researchers suggest that the reality of how many individuals and families are connected to prisoners might make policymakers reconsider the costs of incarceration against the gains. In particular, they point to the burdens placed on families when a family member is imprisoned, the impact on neighborhoods when a significant share of adults are absent, and the stigma that confidants may experience when their friends are incarcerated. The racial disparities the researchers document show that these costs are borne more heavily by Blacks, and by Black women in particular, further disadvantaging an already disadvantaged population.