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Trajectories of neighborhood attainment after prison

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ABSTRACT

A potentially important but understudied aspect of prisoner reentry is the neighborhood environments experienced by formerly incarcerated people. We know that many formerly incarcerated people return to very disadvantaged neighborhood environments and that returning to disadvantaged neighborhoods after prison increases the risk of recidivism and reduces employment. Yet very little is known about the social, economic, and institutional processes that sort formerly incarcerated people into different neighborhoods after release or their trajectories of neighborhood attainment over time. Motivated by a conceptualization of prisoner reentry and reintegration as a process that unfolds over time, we examine trajectories of neighborhood environments after release. Motivated by the literature on neighborhood attainment, social capital, and the role of criminal justice institutions in structuring the lives of former prisoners, we examine sources of variation in neighborhood attainment. We use administrative data from the Michigan Department of Corrections on formerly incarcerated people paroled in 2003 and followed for two years after release. Descriptive results from a latent class trajectory model show that most white and black formerly incarcerated people experience flat trajectories, with little upward or downward residential mobility over time. Findings from multi-level growth curve models suggest that institutional factors are particularly important for the neighborhood attainment of whites, while human capital and social ties are particularly important for blacks. Among both blacks and whites, pre-prison and first post-prison neighborhood conditions exhibit a strong association with post-prison neighborhood attainment, although these associations are larger for blacks than whites.

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1. Introduction

Since the mid-1970s, the prison population in the United States has increased dramatically, and as a result the number of formerly incarcerated people reentering society also grew significantly (Western, 2006; Guerino et al., 2011). The reintegration of formerly incarcerated people is thus a critical aspect of understanding incarceration and its consequences, and the expansion of prisoner reentry has sparked new interest in the factors associated with successful reintegration after release (Visher and Travis, 2003).

An important but understudied aspect of prisoner reentry is neighborhood context. We know that many formerly incarcerated people return to very disadvantaged neighborhoods, characterized by poverty, joblessness, and high rates of

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crime and disorder (Cadora et al., 2003; Lynch and Sabol, 2004; Solomon, 2004), and that returning to disadvantaged neighborhoods after prison increases the risk of recidivism and reduces employment (Hipp et al., 2010; Kubrin and Stewart, 2006; Mears et al., 2008; Morenoff and Harding, 2001).

Despite this evidence on the importance of neighborhood context for the reintegration of formerly incarcerated people, very little is known about the social, economic, and institutional processes that sort formerly incarcerated people into different neighborhoods after release. Only about 40 percent of formerly incarcerated people ever live in their pre-prison neighborhood in the two years following release from prison (Harding et al., 2013), suggesting a role for other processes in determining post-prison residences. Formerly incarcerated people tend to suffer from very high rates of residential instability, particularly in the period immediately after release (Cadora et al., 2003; Lynch and Sabol, 2004; Solomon, 2004; Harding et al., 2013; Herbert et al., 2015), and such residential instability is partly a result of incarceration itself (Warner, 2015). Research has also found that there are stark racial differences in the neighborhood contexts formerly incarcerated people experience after prison (Massoglia et al., 2013). Although minorities tend to move into poorer neighborhoods than whites after prison, this is mainly due to the more general landscape of residential segregation by race rather than the impact of incarceration itself. Moreover, only whites experience worse neighborhood conditions after prison than before (Massoglia et al., 2013; Warner, 2014), but blacks experience greater residential instability (Warner, 2015).

In this paper, we build on this prior work in two ways. First, motivated by a conceptualization of prisoner reentry and reintegration as a process that unfolds over time, we examine trajectories of neighborhood environments after release. Second, motivated by the literature on neighborhood attainment, social capital, and the role of criminal justice institutions in structuring the lives of formerly incarcerated people, we examine other sources of variation in neighborhood attainment, beyond race. We use administrative data from the Michigan Department of Corrections on formerly incarcerated people paroled in 2003 and followed for two years after release.

We first examine whether there are distinguishable trajectories of neighborhood context among formerly incarcerated people. Descriptive results from a group-based trajectory model show that most white and black formerly incarcerated people experience little upward or downward residential mobility over time after release, at least in the first two years. In other words, initial neighborhood conditions tend to persist. We then test various theories about sources of variation in trajectories of neighborhood context by using multi-level growth curve models. Results from the growth curve analysis indicate that institutional factors are particularly important for the neighborhood attainment of whites, while human capital and social ties are particularly important for blacks. Among both blacks and whites, pre-prison and first post-prison neighborhood conditions exhibit a strong association with post-prison neighborhood attainment, although these associations are larger for blacks than whites.

2. The importance of neighborhood context for prisoner reentry

When formerly incarcerated people return home they face significant barriers to acquiring housing, education, work experience and social capital as well as high rates of problems with mental and physical health (Visher and Travis, 2003). They may encounter disadvantages in the labor market because of their lower education level, low job skills and disruptions in employment (Visher and Travis, 2003) as well as the negative effects of the stigma of a criminal record for employment (Pager, 2003). Indeed, the prospects for successful reentry are often dim, as the chances of returning to prison within three years range from 50 to 75% or greater depending on individual and geographic characteristics (Lagan and Levin, 2002).

In addition to individual disadvantages, neighborhood contexts also play a role in prisoner reentry. Those returning from prison are concentrated in disadvantaged neighborhoods (Visher and Travis, 2003; Solomon, 2004). Poor neighborhoods disproportionately suffer not only from scant economic resources but also from weakened community ties that impede community cohesion, trust, and informal social control (Sampson et al., 1997). Furthermore, social services tend to be overburdened in poor neighborhoods (Hipp and Perrin, 2009; Hipp and Yates, 2009). With regard to formal social control, criminal justice supervision systems such as parole and probation as well as police monitoring are likely to be more intense in poor neighborhoods (Lerman and Weaver, 2014; Grattet et al., 2011). Most studies that have been able to access residential information in administrative records on returning prisoners – including those conducted in California (Hipp et al., 2010), Florida (Mears et al., 2008), and Multnomah County, Oregon (Kubrin and Stewart, 2006) – have found that the risk of recidivism (measured by arrests, felony convictions, parole violations, or returns to prison) is greater and the prospects for employment lower (Morenoff and Harding, 2001) for those living in more disadvantaged tracts or counties (for a review, see Morenoff and Harding, 2014). In sum, because many formerly incarcerated people move initially into disadvantaged neighborhoods and because such neighborhoods appear to increase recidivism and reduce employment, avoiding or escaping disadvantaged neighborhoods may be a critical dimension of formerly incarcerated people's successful reintegration.

3. Conceptual framework: neighborhood attainment among formerly incarcerated people

Here we develop a broader conceptual framework for understanding possible influences on neighborhood context among formerly incarcerated people. We draw on the more general literature on neighborhood attainment and social capital as well as an emerging literature on the role of criminal justice institutions in structuring the daily lives of formerly incarcerated people (particularly those on community supervision, such as parole). We draw on three theoretical frameworks: human capital, social ties, and institutional factors. In addition, we suggest the importance of the first post-prison neighborhood for

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