

CONCENTRATIONS OF INCARCERATION: CONSEQUENCES OF COMMUNITIES WITH HIGH PRISON ADMISSIONS AND RETURNS



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Abstract: Mass incarceration in the United States has disproportionately impacted racial and ethnic minorities, particularly those residing in concentrated urban areas. In Illinois, almost half of individuals returning from prison are released in Chicago; of those, about half return to neighborhoods on the city's West and South sides. Research has found that incarceration may, in fact, increase crime as a result of negative consequences to the formerly incarcerated, their families, and their communities. This article reviews literature on the prevalence, causes, and consequences of community concentration of prison admissions and returns. Illinois-specific data on prison admissions and exits are provided.

Introduction

Overuse of imprisonment beginning in the 1970s has resulted in mass incarceration across the United States.¹ The nation holds 1.3 million individuals in state prisons; Illinois holds approximately 41,000.² Over 600,000 inmates are released back into the communities across the country each year.³ In state fiscal year (SFY) 2016, just over 26,000 were admitted to the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC); 28,000 were released.⁴

Data reveals a prison “revolving door,” with many individuals returning to prison due to commission of a new crime or technical violation of parole.⁵ In Illinois, nearly 40% of those released in SFY15 returned to prison within three years.⁶ Prior parole terms may increase the chances of returning to prison. One study of U.S. reentry found 25% of individuals exiting prison fail their first term on parole and return to prison, while 80% who had previously been on parole end up failing to complete parole and return to prison.⁷ The Urban Institute has referred to these individuals as “churners,” or those repeatedly released from prison, placed on parole, and subsequently reincarcerated.⁸

Incarceration disproportionately affects young Black men⁹ and those with lower levels of education.¹⁰ Individuals who are Black are four times more likely than Whites and 2.5 times more likely than Hispanics to be housed in correctional facilities.¹¹ A large proportion of incarcerated individuals are from low socioeconomic backgrounds.¹² Communities most disadvantaged—featuring high levels of poverty and unemployment and low levels of education—tend to be concentrated in urban cities that also experience high crime and incarceration.¹³ In addition, research indicates racial and ethnic minorities and those from communities with more concentrated disadvantage are more likely to be incarcerated for criminal offending compared to their White counterparts residing in more affluent communities.¹⁴

Research indicates incarceration negatively affects individuals during their prison stay and long after they have served their sentence. This affects their children and families, social networks, and the communities in which they live.¹⁵

This article explores Illinois data on prison admissions and exits with spatial mapping and reviews literature on the negative effects and consequences of high incarceration in certain urban communities.

A combination of historical economic forces and residential segregation have clustered impoverished racial and ethnic minorities in specific urban neighborhoods, resulting in “concentration effects” of compounded disadvantageous conditions which may have uniquely deleterious consequences.

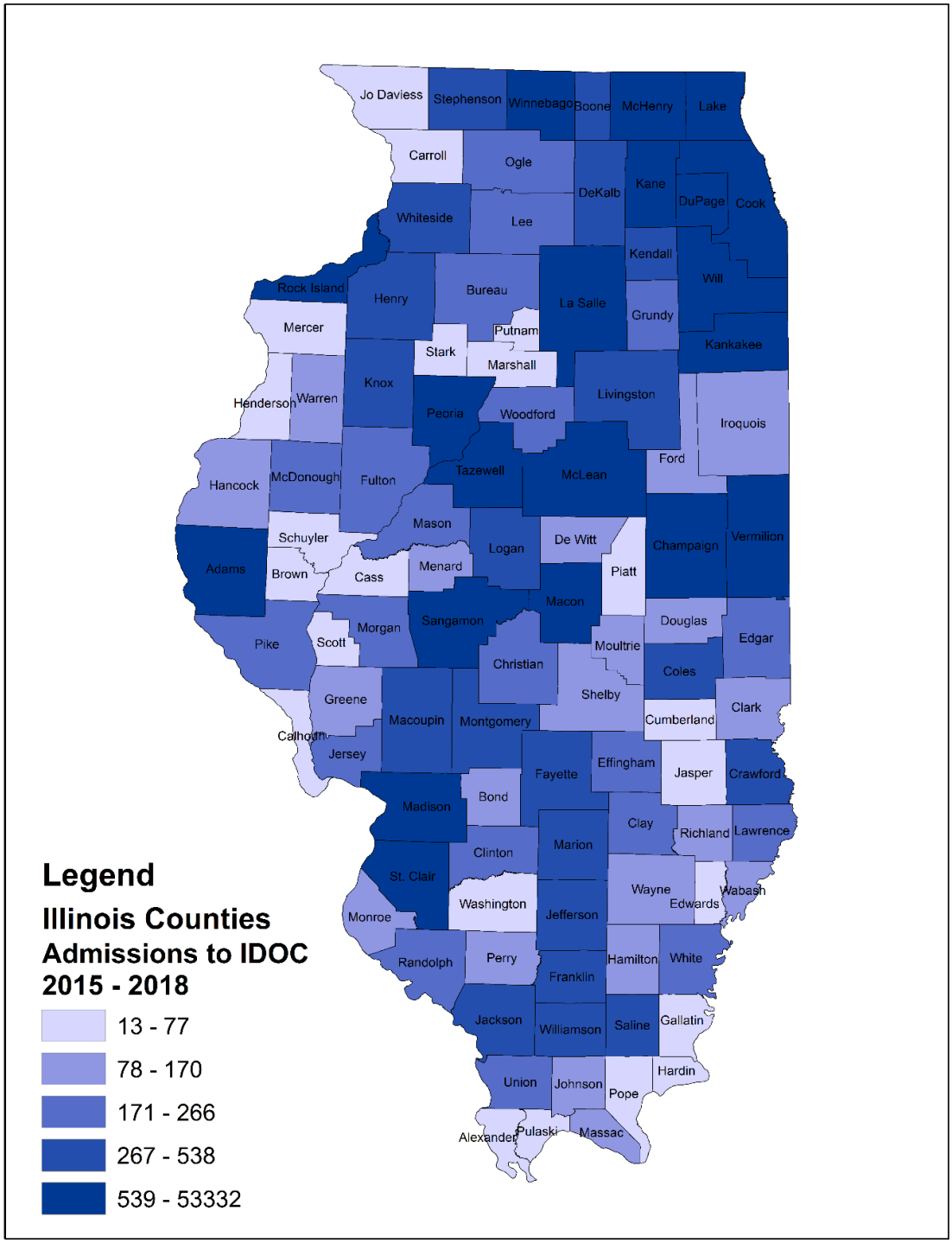
Source: Drakulich, K. M., Crutchfield, R. D., Matsueda, R. L., & Rose, K. (2012). Instability, informal social control, and criminogenic situations: Community effects of returning prisoners. *Crime, Law, and Social Change*. 57, 493-519.

Illinois Prison Use by Location

In Illinois in 2018, 7,986 adults or 47.9% of all prisoners were admitted to IDOC from Cook County followed by Will (615), Winnebago (521), Lake (475), DuPage (440), and Kane (425)

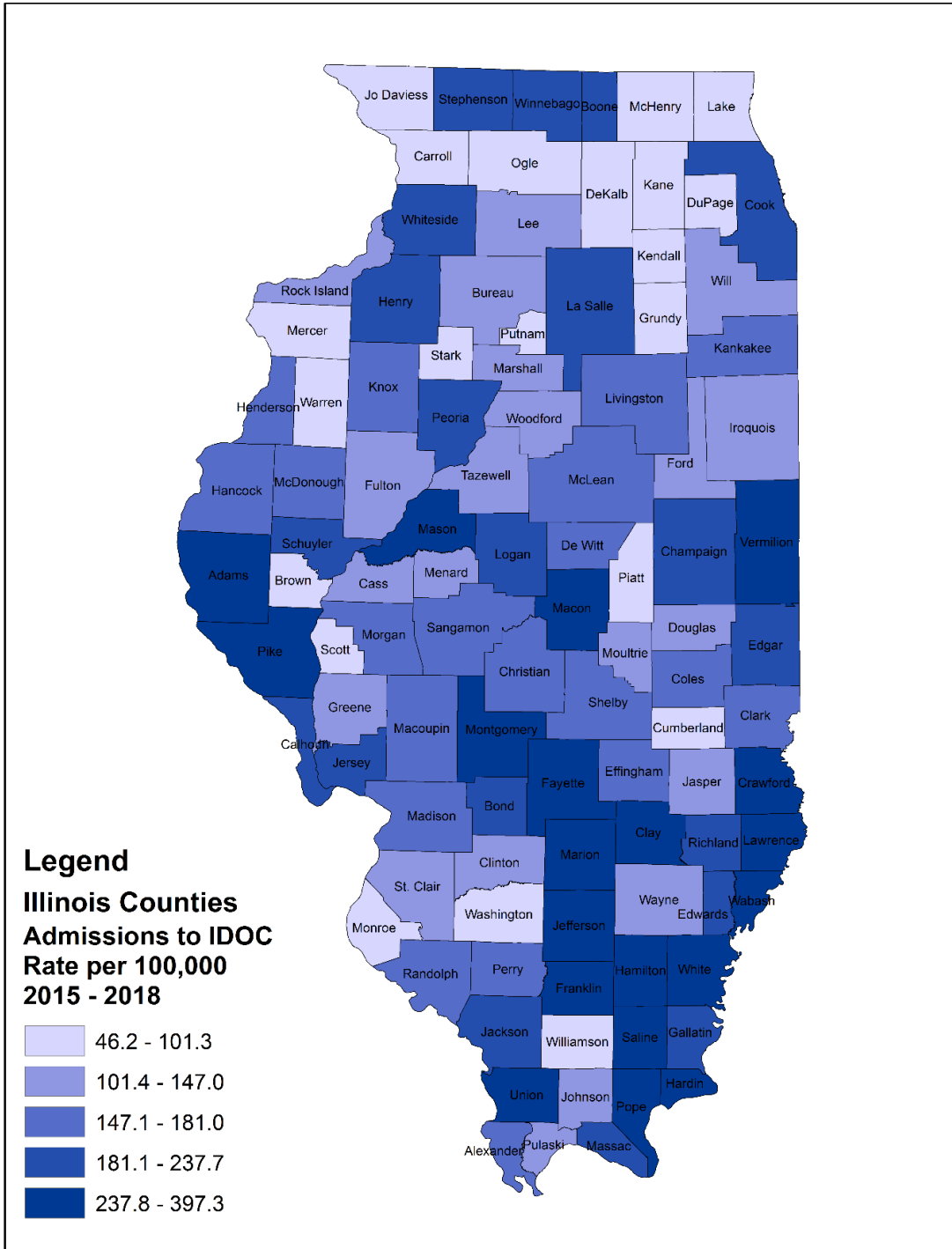
counties (*Map 1*). However, taking into account the population, Gallatin had the highest rate of prison admissions in 2018 at 425 per 100,000 population followed by Lawrence (326), Pike (304), Mason (287), Crawford (266) and Clay (264) Counties (*Map 2*).

Map 1
Number of Illinois Prison Admissions by County



Source: ICJIA analysis of IDOC data

Map 2
Rate of Illinois Prison Admissions by County



Source: ICJIA analysis of IDOC data

A 2005 Urban Institute study on Chicago prisoner reentry showed 54% of males in prison returned to seven of Chicago's 77 neighborhoods.¹⁶ In addition, community residents, reentry policymakers and practitioners, and formerly incarcerated individuals reported Chicago

neighborhoods with high numbers of formerly incarcerated community members returning from prison were unprepared and lacked services needed to assist.¹⁷

Overview on Negative Effects of Incarceration

The negative consequences of incarceration on individuals, their families and friends, and communities are felt particularly by those who are disadvantaged and living in urban neighborhoods.¹⁸

Individual Effects

Research has documented how incarceration exacerbates the disadvantages experienced by those who are incarcerated, such as inadequate education and vocation skills.¹⁹ Undereducated and lower-skilled workers are overrepresented in prisons. Imprisonment leads to employment history gaps, diminishes social networks that can assist in a job search after release, and creates stigma and restrictions that become barriers to getting hired.²⁰

Those who are incarcerated also disproportionately experience certain health problems compared to the general population, including infectious diseases (HIV/AIDS, Hepatitis B and C, and tuberculosis), chronic diseases (asthma, diabetes, and hypertension), and mental illness.²¹ Many prisons cannot, or do not, adequately prevent, screen, or treat these issues or adhere to national standards and guidelines.²² Aspects of incarceration itself, including lack of material comforts, restricted movement and agency, lack of personal privacy, and safety concerns about threats posed by other inmates can be sources of stress.²³ However, research indicates incarceration may have a protective effect on death rates for Black men.²⁴ This may be due to decreased exposure to violence and accidents in a controlled prison environment, but also could be indicative of limited access to medical care for serious injuries occurring outside of prison walls.²⁵

The collateral consequences of incarceration are well-documented. Collateral consequences place additional burdens and sanctions on people who have served their sentences.²⁶ These consequences may include restrictions on:

- Voting.
- Serving on a jury.
- Holding public office.
- Securing employment and licenses.²⁷
- Obtaining housing.
- Receiving public assistance.
- Owning a firearm.
- Getting a driver's license.
- Qualifying for financial aid and college admission.
- Qualifying for military service.²⁸

Non-citizens also may face deportation. These consequences make it difficult to become and continue to be productive in society, leading to an increased risk for recidivism and possible re-imprisonment. The Council of State Governments Justice Center the [National Inventory of the](#)

[Collateral Consequences of Conviction](#), an extensive database on legal and regulatory collateral consequences of incarceration.²⁹

Many individuals violate the terms of their parole and be returned to prison, not necessarily for a new crime but for a technical violation.³⁰ Technical violations occur when a parolee fails to follow rules established as part of their parole terms, such as keeping appointments with a parole officer, refraining from drug use, and abiding by a curfew.³¹ In Illinois, 23% of parolees were readmitted to prison for a violation after three years; 17% were readmitted after receiving a sentence for another crime.³² Illinois is one of seven states with the most individuals serving time for a technical violation of parole—ranging between 11 to 20%.³³

Family and Social Networks

Comfort (2007) notes that individuals who are formerly incarcerated are not "social isolates," but embedded in every facet of social life as parents, partners, friends, and neighbors.³⁴ Further, Comfort states, "Through their association with someone convicted of a crime, legally innocent people have firsthand and often intense contact with criminal justice authorities and correctional facilities, they experience variants of the direct and indirect consequences of incarceration, and they are confronted by the paradox of a penal state that has become the primary distributor of social services for the poor in the United States."³⁵ Incarceration can negatively impact social networks who may be cautious, skeptical, and even fearful.³⁶

Family issues extend to both men and women who are sent to, or return from, prison. Incarceration can break up families. Partners are left to solely maintain the household, be the breadwinner and caretaker for children, and lean on family members for help.³⁷ Partners feel the stigma of having a spouse or significant other in prison. They experience the burden of scheduled phone calls and prison visits (often at great distances and expense), isolation and disconnection from their partner, and the restrictions of parole once their partners are released, including home visits and electronic monitoring.³⁸ In addition, research indicates after their release from prison, the formerly incarcerated may be perceived as less desirable as a marriage partner and are less likely to marry.³⁹

An estimated 52% of persons in state prisons were parents of minor children in 2008.⁴⁰ Estimates indicate more than 5 million children have had at least one parent in prison in the United States.⁴¹ About half of those in state prison reported they provided primary financial support for their minor children before their incarceration.⁴² In general, women who are new mothers or give birth in prison are separated from their babies, which can negatively impact post-natal and longer term health of mother and child.⁴³ Child support requirements continue to accrue while the person is incarcerated and become difficult to pay back.⁴⁴

Research has found parental incarceration has negative effects on children including:

- Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) that are stressful or traumatic events (i.e., abuse or neglect).⁴⁵
- Physical and mental health problems such as asthma, depression, and anxiety in childhood and into adulthood.

- Behavioral issues.
- Education problems such as grade retention.
- Stigma.

In a recent study, parental incarceration was associated with young adults' increased odds of having an anxiety disorder, a felony offense charge, time spent in jail, no high school completion, parenthood at an age younger than 18 years, and social isolation.⁴⁶

Community

A majority of urban communities from which individuals are arrested and subsequently incarcerated, as well as return, are low-income areas. These communities often do not have the

The experience of incarceration is thus being disproportionately concentrated spatially in disadvantaged neighborhoods and is proportionately concentrated among the young urban minority males who live in those neighborhoods. Although the use of incarceration is an action that is directed at individuals its “cumulative impact” is differentially distributed across places.

Source: Frost, N. A., & Gross, L. A. (2012). Coercive mobility and the impact of prison-cycling on communities. *Crime Law and Social Change*, 57, 459–474.

capacity to assist their residents, both those who are justice-involved and those who are not, in areas of mental health, substance use disorder treatment, employment opportunities, healthcare, and housing.⁴⁷ In addition, according to Morenhoff and Harding, “Many former prisoners return to communities to live alongside other former prisoners, which carries implications for competition for scarce resources, criminal opportunities, and the effectiveness of formal and informal social control.”⁴⁸

Other implications of mass incarceration for concentrated communities include:

- A gender imbalance and a paucity of male role models.⁴⁹
- Increased fear of community residents.⁵⁰
- Lack of social cohesion, collective efficacy, and increased social disorganization.⁵¹
- Reduced economic opportunities and development.⁵²
- Restricted voting contributing to weakened political power of low-income and minority communities.⁵³
- Increased crime (further addressed in the next section)⁵⁴ and violence.⁵⁵

Overall, reduced human capital due to high admissions and returns to prisons places burdens on the fabric of communities in multiple ways.

Theoretical Framework on Incarceration Leading to Increased Crime

Krakulich notes a “paradoxical consequence of a crime control strategy,” in that crime can be increased by incarceration—the measure intended to control it.⁵⁶ Two theoretical explanations exist for this phenomenon. Frameworks posed by Rose and Clear⁵⁷ and Sampson⁵⁸ are based on Shaw and McKay’s social disorganization theory.⁵⁹ The theory posits that inner-city areas

characterized by high poverty, high resident mobility, and differences in race, ethnicity, and cultures are associated with higher rates of crime.

Rose and Clear hypothesized that “coercive mobility” due to high levels of residents going in and out of prison can cause social disorganization. This mobility can destabilize community life, burden families, exacerbate concentrated disadvantage, and increase crime. Rose and Clear reference a tipping point—imprisoning criminal offenders can be good for a society but at a certain point, it becomes criminogenic.⁶⁰ Some studies have tested the hypothesis and found that removing a high concentration of offenders from the community increases social disorganization and crime.⁶¹ However, sufficient direct evidence to confirm this hypothesis is limited.⁶² A similar theory from Sampson posits that the removal of young males from the community due to incarceration creates unemployment and an imbalance in the number of women, causing family disruption and social disorganization.⁶³

Policy and Practice Recommendations

The following recommendations may be applied to curb the impacts of incarceration on individuals, families, and communities. It is recognized that many of the suggestions will require resources and/or policy and legislative changes. Also important are addressing collateral consequences of having a criminal record, promoting economic development in communities, and conducting additional research to further examine the impacts of coercive mobility.

Enhance Reentry Services

Travis and colleagues recommended engaging individuals prior to their release from prison and helping those released navigate the first hours and days in the community.⁶⁴ In an Urban Institute reentry study in Chicago, community residents, reentry policymakers, and practitioners recommended parole officers have smaller caseloads, offer supportive services, and supervise closely.⁶⁵ In addition, prison-based medical and behavioral health care can address physical, mental health, and substance use disorders which are often underlying causes of criminality. A focus on prevention, screening, and treating health issues and adherence to national standards and guidelines is important.⁶⁶ Reentry programs that adhere to the evidence-based [risk-need-responsivity \(RNR\) model](#) have been shown to improve reentry outcomes.⁶⁷ The other article in this series offers more information on evidence-based practices and programs for reentry.

If prisons are not successful in addressing deficits, and there is ample evidence to suggest they are not, widespread incarceration reinforces existing disadvantages, to the detriment of inmates and the communities to which they return.

Source: Wakefield, S., & Uggen, C. (2010). Incarceration and stratification. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 36, 387-406.

Community Development, Engagement, and Services

Disadvantaged communities are not well equipped to support those sent to prison or their family members remaining in the community. A Chicago-based Urban Institute reentry study found that neighborhoods could benefit from community development assistance, such as building coalitions of local organizations, securing additional resources, and engaging local residents in the process.⁶⁸ Similarly, Travis and colleagues recommended the following for successful reentry through community engagement:

- Develop neighborhood-based networks of workforce development partners and local businesses who will target the preparation and employment of parolees.
- Engage local community-based organizations to help family members of parolees as they support successful reentry.
- Involve local faith institutions for mentoring support in the neighborhood.
- Provide parolees opportunities to participate in community service to be assets in the community.
- Develop coalitions of resident leaders to oversee reentry efforts.⁶⁹

Research has shown support for community engagement with, and collaboration among, community and criminal and juvenile justice systems, to create and sustain awareness and resources will improve reentry outcomes.⁷⁰ In addition, preliminary research indicates reinvestment into community organizations that work in various ways to impact public safety are promising to reduce recidivism.⁷¹

Conclusion

While some individuals should be removed from society to protect victims and ensure public safety, the United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world, indicating overuse, and particularly impacting individuals who are poor, uneducated, and racial and ethnic minorities. Research literature indicates periods of incarceration can worsen underserved communities, disproportionately impacting minorities with educational, economic, and social disadvantages.⁷² Research supports the hypothesis that the high volume and frequent absence of individuals who go to prison, largely from urban cities, can profoundly affect their families and communities and even lead to more community crime.⁷³ Enhanced reentry services and strengthened community cohesion and development may help justice-involved individuals, their families, and their communities enhance public safety while contributing to a reduction in mass incarceration.

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