

The Role of Incarceration in Racial Disparities in Gonorrhea and Syphilis

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Abstract

From 1980 to 2000, the incarceration rate of Black males aged 15-44 grew from 3.17 percent to 10.04 percent, a 217 percent increase. Within this age bracket incarceration rates are the highest among men of marrying age. The rise in Black male incarceration has caused the sex ratio (of men to women) to fall sharply, leaving a surplus of unattached Black women in relationship markets. We argue that this imbalance affects the terms of trade in sexual exchange, enhancing the bargaining position of Black men so as to facilitate semi-polygamous sexual relationships, and thereby increasing concurrency. Concurrency, in turn, speeds the spread of STIs across the sexual network.

To test the relationship between the spread of STIs, we examine the effect of male incarceration on gonorrhea and syphilis incidence. We focus on gonorrhea and syphilis because they have short incubation spells, making incidence a good gauge for contemporaneous sexual behavior. Using panel data on state, age and race-specific disease and incarceration over the 1981-2000 period, we estimate the effect of male incarceration on the gonorrhea and syphilis rate for females and males, separately for blacks and whites. We control for stage-age-cohort effects and effects of the crack epidemic (using the crack index constructed by Fryer, Heaton, Levitt and Murphy (2006)). We find that a 1 point increase in the Black male incarceration generates 20 new cases (per 100,000) of gonorrhea for Black females. This result is precisely estimated and robust to variety of regression specifications. The effect of incarceration on syphilis is smaller and less robust.