

Racial and Class Inequality in US Incarceration

Racial and Class Inequality in US Incarceration in the Early Twenty-First Century

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The relative importance of racial and class inequality in incarceration in the United States has recently become the subject of much debate. In this paper, we seek to give this debate a stronger empirical foundation. First, we update previous research on racial and class inequality in people's likelihood of being imprisoned. Then, we examine racial and class inequality in people's risk of having a family member imprisoned or living in a high-imprisonment neighborhood. We find that racial inequality in prison admissions has fallen in the twenty-first century, while class inequality has surged. However, in recent years, Black people with high levels of education and income were more likely than white people with low levels of education and income to experience the imprisonment of a family member or to live in a neighborhood with a high imprisonment rate. These seemingly contradictory conclusions can be reconciled by the fact that enduring structures of racial domination have made class boundaries among Black people more permeable than they are among white people. Imprisonment in the United States is increasingly reserved for the poor. But because Black Americans are disproportionately connected to the poor through their families and neighborhoods, racial inequality exceeds class inequality in people's indirect experiences with imprisonment.

Prisons in the United States are sites of stark racial and class inequality. Black people, poor people, and less educated people, among others, are incarcerated at disproportionately high rates (Gilmore 2007; Western and Pettit 2010; Wacquant 2010). Racial inequality in incarceration stretches back to the end of Reconstruction (Davis 1998; Muller 2021). It grew rapidly in the first half of the twentieth century, particularly during the first Great Black migration to the North (Muller 2012). During the prison boom in the late-twentieth

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century, racial inequality in incarceration remained consistently high while class inequality widened (Pettit and Western 2004; Western 2006; Pettit et al. 2009).

Recently, the relative importance of racial and class inequality in incarceration has become the subject of a sometimes intense debate. This is partly due to the reception of Michelle Alexander's bestselling book, *The New Jim Crow*. Alexander's (2010) argument in *The New Jim Crow* is broad and multifaceted, but critics took aim at its central metaphor, which they claimed overshadowed rising rates of incarceration among groups other than Black Americans and growing class inequality in incarceration among Black and white Americans alike (Forman Jr 2012; Gottschalk 2015).

However, the empirical basis for this debate has been limited in two important ways. First, our best estimates of class inequality in prison admissions end in 2001 (Western 2006). Given rising class inequality in mortality and other measures of well-being in the intervening years (Case and Deaton 2020, 2021), these estimates may understate the degree of class inequality in imprisonment today. Second, these estimates focus exclusively on racial and class inequality in an individual person's likelihood of going to prison. However, people experience the negative effects of imprisonment not just directly, but also indirectly through their families and neighborhoods. Because Black people are disproportionately connected to poor family members and poor neighborhoods (Pattillo-McCoy 1999; Pattillo 2005; Heflin and Pattillo 2006; Sharkey 2014), racial and class inequality in people's risk of having a family member imprisoned or living in a high-imprisonment neighborhood may differ from racial and class inequality in their risk of being imprisoned themselves.

In this paper, we seek to set this debate on a stronger empirical foundation. Our primary aim is to describe recent patterns in racial and class inequality in US incarceration. First, we extend previous research on racial and class inequality in people's likelihood of being imprisoned through 2015. Then, we report estimates of racial and class inequality in people's risk of having a family member imprisoned or living in a high-imprisonment neighborhood.

Using educational attainment as a proxy for class (Pettit and Western 2004; Western 2006; Western and Pettit 2010), we find that class inequality in imprisonment has surged. Racial inequality in prison admissions, in contrast, remains high but has declined. Falling racial inequality and rising class inequality in imprisonment partly reflect the continuation of late-twentieth-century trends: the prison admission rates of college-educated Black and white people continued to decrease, while the prison admission rate of white people with no college education continued to increase. The exception is the prison admission rate of Black people with no college education, which, after sustained growth, fell precipitously beginning in 2000.

Our analysis shows that in the late-twentieth century, the Black-white disparity in imprisonment was comparable in magnitude to the disparity between people with no college education and people with some. However, in the twenty-first century, the no-college-any-college disparity grew to greatly exceed the Black-white disparity in imprisonment. In 2015, Black people with and without any college education were, respectively, 2.7 and 2.0 times likelier to

be imprisoned than white people with the same education. By contrast, Black and white people with no college education were, respectively, 22 and 28 times likelier to be imprisoned than Black and white people with any college education. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, white people with no college education were admitted to prison at rates comparable to those of college-educated Black people. By 2015, the prison admission rate of white people with no college education had grown to more than ten times that of Black people with any college education.

However, despite recent declines in racial inequality in prison admissions, we find that racial inequality exceeds class inequality in people's likelihood of having a family member imprisoned or living in a high-imprisonment neighborhood. High-education and high-income Black people are just as likely or likelier than low-education and low-income white people, respectively, to experience the imprisonment of a family member or to live in a neighborhood with a high imprisonment rate. Adjusting for household size, Black people with \$100,000 in household income have the same likelihood of having a family member imprisoned as white people with \$9,000 in household income. Black–white gaps in people's likelihood of living in a high-imprisonment neighborhood were larger than gaps between the most and least educated people and between the richest and poorest households.

Our analysis makes two principal contributions. First, we show that racial inequality in prison admissions declined in the early-twenty-first century, while class inequality in prison admissions reached alarming new extremes. Class inequality now exceeds racial inequality in prison admissions by an order of magnitude. Second, we use the concept of class permeability developed by Wright (1997) to explain why, despite this fact, racial inequality exceeds class inequality in family-member and neighborhood imprisonment. Because Black Americans are more likely than comparable white Americans to have poor family members and to live in poor neighborhoods, they are also more likely to experience the imprisonment of a family member and to live in a neighborhood with a high imprisonment rate. Taken together, these findings highlight the importance of precisely identifying how racial and class inequality in incarceration are intertwined.

Racial and Class Inequality in Imprisonment

The explosive growth of incarceration in the United States at the end of the twentieth century has received an extraordinary amount of scholarly attention. But few books have reached as broad an audience as Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*. Alexander's book centered on how mass incarceration dramatically increased the number of people with criminal records—records that subject them to legal discrimination in housing, employment, education, and public benefits. The book devoted special attention to the War on Drugs, which disproportionately targeted Black people, due in part to the concentration of police in poor, predominantly Black, neighborhoods. Together, the social

and legal consequences of having a criminal record and the overrepresentation of Black people among those with criminal records were two of the central motivations for Alexander's (2010, p. 11) conclusion that "mass incarceration is, metaphorically, the New Jim Crow."

Subsequent critiques of *The New Jim Crow* by James Forman Jr. and Marie Gottschalk argued that the book's central metaphor has important empirical and strategic shortcomings. Forman (2012, p. 21) notes that the analogy "obscures class distinctions within the African American community, and overlooks the effects of mass incarceration on other racial groups." Gottschalk (2015, p. 5) similarly contends that the metaphor overshadows the fact that poor people of other racial groups "have been a booming growth area for the carceral state." Although Forman and Gottschalk acknowledge the deep and brutal history of racial inequality in incarceration and share Alexander's goal of ending mass incarceration, they believe that downplaying mass incarceration's effects on poor people of other racial groups impedes the formation of a "broad political movement necessary to dramatically reduce the number of people in jail or prison" (Gottschalk 2015, p. 3). In short, if these groups are left out of conversations about the harm of incarceration, they will be "less likely to see a campaign against it as speaking to and for them" (Forman Jr 2012, p. 65).

Forman and Gottschalk appeal to the work of Bruce Western, whose influential book, *Punishment and Inequality in America* (2006), showed that the late-twentieth-century rise in incarceration in the United States was typified by widening class inequality and relatively stable racial inequality in prison admissions. Western's (2006, p. 75) analysis, which ends in 2001, has not been updated. Thus, debates about racial and class inequality in incarceration in the early twenty-first century have taken place without an understanding of whether the trends Western identified have reversed, continued, or accelerated.

Recent work by Anne Case and Angus Deaton suggests that there are good reasons to believe that class inequality in incarceration has intensified. Case and Deaton (2020) document a dramatic twenty-first-century increase in the mortality rate of white Americans without a bachelor's degree, driven by deaths from suicide and alcohol and drug use. The mortality crisis among white Americans followed an earlier mortality crisis among Black Americans due to the epidemics of crack cocaine and HIV. Both crises, Case and Deaton (2020) note, were precipitated by large-scale job loss, particularly among low-education workers. To the extent that imprisonment, like mortality, reflects broad-based changes in people's life chances (Wilson 1987; Sen 1998; Autor et al. 2016), trends in imprisonment may track these trends in mortality (Beckett and Brydolf-Horwitz 2020).

Other scholars have stressed the importance of studying the interaction of racial and class inequality in incarceration. Soss and Weaver (2017, p. 567), for instance, use the phrase *race-class subjugated communities* to draw attention to "the crucial interplay of race and class" in people's exposure to the carceral state. Wacquant (2010, p. 74) coins the term *hyperincarceration* to describe the "triple selectivity" of the United States' prison expansion: "first by class, second by race, and third by place." More generally, research on intersectionality has called on

scholars to study the ways that racial and class inequality are intertwined (Collins 2015), while work on racial capitalism has urged scholars to examine how racial domination is perpetuated by and integral to the dynamics of capitalist development (Robinson 2000 [1983]).

One way of responding to these calls is by studying racial inequality in what Erik Olin Wright (1997) calls class permeability. The concept of class permeability calls attention to the fact that people do not “simply fill locations within class structures. Their lives criss-cross the class structure in a variety of ways” (Wright and Cho 1992, p. 85). Wright (1997, p. 151) defines two kinds of permeability: *static* permeability, which refers to “patterns of social ties between people situated in different locations within a class structure,” and *dynamic* permeability, which refers to “the ways in which biographical trajectories traverse different locations within class structures.” People’s ties to relatives or neighbors in other class locations are examples of static permeability. Intergenerational mobility is an example of dynamic permeability. Wright (1997, p. 150) argues that class permeability is important because it influences people’s willingness to form “political coalitions across specific class boundaries.” He further insists that it forces us to reconsider how we define class. “Rather than asking ‘in what class is person X,’” Wright (1997, p. 277) proposes, “we should ask, ‘what is the location of person X within a network of direct and mediated class relations.’” This second question enables us to see that the class position of a person with financial obligations to poor family members will not be adequately captured by studying their income or education alone (Chiteji and Hamilton 2002; Heflin and Pattillo 2006; O’Brien 2012).

Wright’s analysis underscores that focusing exclusively on an individual person’s class location can obscure how they may be tied to the poor through their families and neighborhoods, even if they are not poor themselves. Given the concentration of imprisonment among the poor, such people are also more likely to have family members who have been imprisoned and to live in neighborhoods with a high imprisonment rate. Although their experience with imprisonment is indirect, they are still harmed by it, as a large body of research and personal testimony makes clear (Wilson 1987; Clear 2007; Comfort 2007; Bobo and Thompson 2010; Harris et al. 2010; Sugie 2012; Wildeman and Muller 2012; Wakefield and Wildeman 2013; Morenoff and Harding 2014; Sykes and Pettit 2014; Lee et al. 2015; Allen 2017; Manduca and Sampson 2019; Chung and Hepburn 2018; Western 2018; Haskins and McCauley 2019; Reich and Prins 2020; Miller 2021). Moreover, because movements opposing mass incarceration have often been led by people with imprisoned family members and neighbors (Gilmore 2007), the composition of these movements will reflect not just class inequality, but class permeability as well.

Wright’s research focuses on cross-national differences in class permeability. But the concept can be usefully applied to differences in the permeability of class boundaries among Black and white Americans. A large body of sociological scholarship suggests that enduring structures of racial domination have made class boundaries among Black people more permeable than they are among white

people. This fact complicates a straightforward comparison of racial and class inequality in incarceration.

Black people in the United States have drastically lower levels of wealth than white people. The Black–white wealth gap originated in slavery and persisted through the systematic exclusion of Black Americans from land- and home-ownership (Miller 2011; Taylor 2019). Because of Black families' historically low levels of wealth, more upper- and middle-class Black people than upper- and middle-class white people are offshoots from poor family trees (Chiteji and Hamilton 2002; Pfeffer and Killewald 2019). Thus, compared to similar white people, upper- and middle-class Black people have a high likelihood of having poor family members both within and across generations. Heflin and Pattillo (2006), for example, show that middle-class Black people are much more likely than middle-class white people to have a poor sibling.

Black Americans also experience higher rates of downward mobility than white Americans. High- and middle-income Black parents are more likely than high- and middle-income white parents to have low-income children, whose risk of imprisonment is far greater than that of the upper- and middle-class (Pfeffer and Killewald 2019; Chetty et al. 2020). Chetty et al. (2020, p. 744–746) show that Black men whose parents had incomes in the top 1 percent of the income distribution had the same incarceration rate as white men whose parents had incomes at the 34th percentile. Upper- and middle-class Black Americans thus should be more likely than comparable white Americans to have imprisoned family members.

The long history of segregation, ghettoization, and housing discrimination in the United States has also meant that upper- and middle-class Black families are more likely than upper- and middle-class white families to live in or near poor neighborhoods (Massey and Denton 1993; Pattillo-McCoy 1999; Pattillo 2005; Wacquant 2012). Although the proportion of upper- and middle-class Black families residing in disadvantaged neighborhoods fell considerably in the late-twentieth century, in 2000, Black households making more than \$100,000 a year lived, on average, in more disadvantaged neighborhoods than white households earning less than \$30,000 a year (Sharkey 2014, pp. 927, 934; see also Reardon et al. 2015). Given the concentration of police and imprisonment in poor, predominantly Black, neighborhoods (Sampson and Loeffler 2010; Wacquant 2010; Morenoff and Harding 2014; Simes 2018), upper- and middle-class Black families should consequently have greater exposure to high-imprisonment neighborhoods than their white counterparts.

In sum, recent increases in class inequality in mortality and other measures of well-being suggest that class inequality in incarceration has likely risen as well. But the fact that class boundaries among Black people are more permeable than they are among white people indicates that racial and class inequality in people's likelihood of being imprisoned may depart from racial and class inequality in their likelihood of having a family member imprisoned or living in a high-imprisonment neighborhood. The concept of class permeability offers a concise term for describing the consequence of a diverse set of causes—Black–white wealth inequality, differences in downward mobility, and residential segregation,

ghettoization, and housing discrimination—that contribute to racial inequality in people’s kinship and residential ties to the poor. Here we use it to describe the interaction of racial and class inequality in incarceration, but the study of racial inequality in class permeability should extend beyond the domain of punishment.

The Present Study

In the following three empirical sections, we examine racial and class inequality in people’s likelihood of being imprisoned, having a family member imprisoned, or living in a high-imprisonment neighborhood. In the first empirical section, we use restricted-access administrative data to extend [Western’s \(2006\)](#) analysis of racial and class inequality in prison admissions through 2015. We focus on prison admissions for two reasons. First, this makes our results comparable to those reported by [Western \(2006\)](#). Second, prison admission rates measure the flow of people into prison in a given year. This makes them a better measure of recent changes in imprisonment than imprisonment rates, which reflect both recent prison admissions and the lagged effect of earlier prison admissions. Although numerous studies, including the annual reports of the Bureau of Justice Statistics, have tracked changes in racial inequality in incarceration in the twenty-first century ([Subramanian et al. 2018](#); [Beckett and Brydolf-Horwitz 2020](#); [Sabol et al. 2020](#)), these studies have not conducted parallel analyses of changes in class inequality in prison admissions.

In the second empirical section, we use new survey data to study racial and class inequality in people’s likelihood of having a family member imprisoned. This analysis builds on previous research using survey data ([Wildeman and Wakefield 2014](#); [Lee et al. 2015](#); [Bobo and Thompson 2010](#); [Enns et al. 2019](#)) and microsimulation techniques ([Chung and Hepburn 2018](#)) to examine people’s connections to incarcerated family members beyond parents. To our knowledge, only two previous studies have reported estimates of racial and class inequality in the incarceration of family members, broadly defined. [Bobo and Thompson \(2010\)](#) estimate the likelihood that Black and white people of different income and education levels had a friend or relative incarcerated. However, their analysis uses survey data from 2001 and 2002, whereas our estimates are based on data collected in 2018. [Enns et al. \(2019\)](#) use the same survey data we use to calculate the proportion of people in different racial and educational groups who had ever had a family member imprisoned. We extend this analysis in two ways. First, we directly estimate Black–white ratios at different educational levels and educational ratios among Black and white people. Second, we study income as well as education.

In the third empirical section, we use administrative data to estimate racial and class inequality in people’s likelihood of living in a high-imprisonment neighborhood. Several studies ([Sampson and Loeffler 2010](#); [Simes 2018](#)) have documented the extreme spatial concentration of incarceration. However, we know of no previous research that examines how people’s exposure to

high-imprisonment neighborhoods varies according to both their racial classification and their class location.

Due to the limits of existing data, we cannot measure class directly. This imposes two important restrictions on our analysis. First, we are forced to measure class *gradationally* rather than *relationally*, assigning people a class location based on their “quantitative degree of some attribute (income, status, education, etc.) and not by their location within a determinate relation” (Wright 1985, p. 34). Second, although some scholars view education as a measure of socioeconomic status rather than class (Sørensen 2000; Weeden and Grusky 2005), we follow scholars of punishment in using education as a proxy for class (Pettit and Western 2004; Western 2006; Western and Pettit 2010).

Nonetheless, studying educational inequality in imprisonment has some advantages. Most simply, it makes our analysis of prison admissions comparable to previous research (Western 2006), which also focuses on educational inequality. But it also accords with the work of Case and Deaton (2020), which suggests that a college education is an increasingly salient divide and determinant of life chances in the twenty-first-century United States (see also Therborn 2013). Our data on prison admissions include no information about people’s income, so in the first empirical section, we restrict our focus to educational inequality. In the second and third empirical sections on family-member and neighborhood imprisonment, we report results using income as well as education. Our findings based on these two different measures are very similar.

Inequality in Imprisonment Over Time

To estimate changes in racial and class inequality in imprisonment in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries, we build on a method pioneered by Western (2006, p. 80). Our principal data source is the National Corrections Reporting Program (NCRP), which is administered by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS). The NCRP relies on the voluntary contributions of state correctional agencies, which submit data to BJS on every person entering prison with a criminal sentence each year. We use these restricted-access data to generate annual prison admission rates from 1984 to 2015 for four groups of people aged 20 to 39, defined by their racial and ethnic identification (Black non-Hispanic or white non-Hispanic) and their educational attainment (no years of college completed or at least one year of college completed). We follow Western (2006) in restricting our analysis to people aged 20 to 39. Online Appendix A reproduces our results for people aged 20 and older.

Although recent research highlights the divide in life chances between those with and without a bachelor’s degree (Case and Deaton 2020), we examine the college–no college divide because the NCRP does not distinguish between prisoners with associate’s and bachelor’s degrees. This has the advantage of making our results comparable to prior research (Western 2006; Pettit et al. 2009; Western and Pettit 2010). For simplicity and to maintain fidelity to the language that defines categories of people in the administrative data we use, we

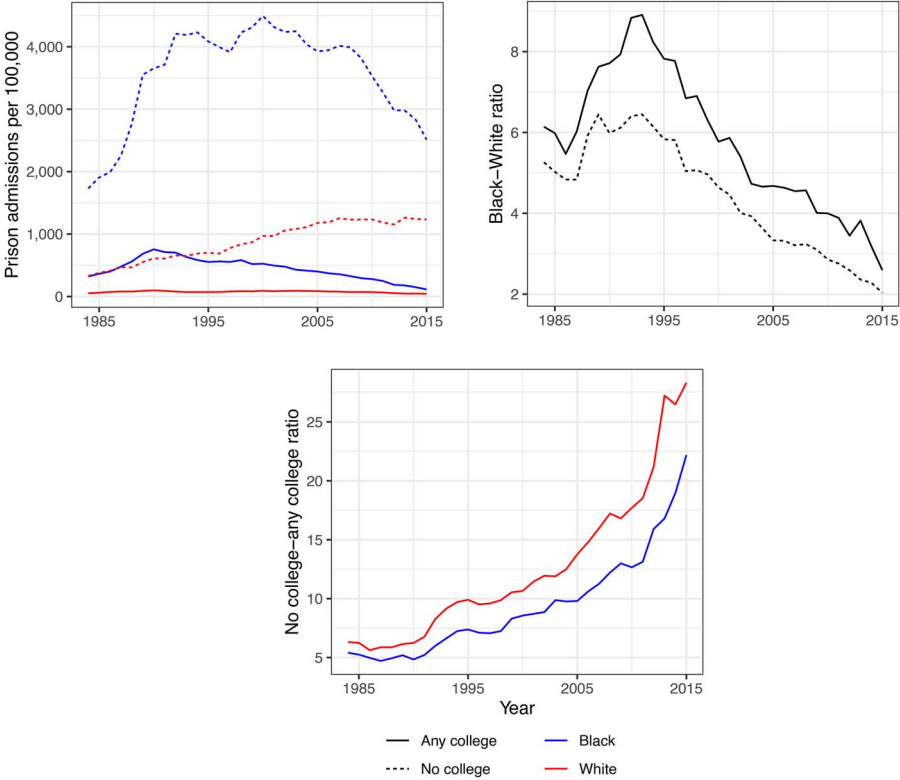
refer to the two racial groups as “Black people” and “white people,” and to the two educational groups as having “no college” and “any college” education.

The states that participate in the NCRP account for vast majority of all state prison admissions over the period of analysis. However, different states report to the NCRP in different years. To generate national estimates, we calculate the proportion of people admitted to state prison observed in the NCRP in each year who belong to each racial–educational group. We then multiply these proportions by [BJS \(2017\)](#) estimates of the total number of people admitted to prison nationally in each year. This yields a national estimate of the number of people in each racial–educational group admitted to prison annually. Finally, we divide these estimates by population counts of each group from the Current Population Survey Merged Outgoing Rotation Groups (MORG) to generate a national prison admission rate for each group. Our approach rests on the assumption that people in each racial–educational group are admitted to prison in roughly the same proportion nationally as they are in the states we use to generate our estimates. This assumption should be kept in mind when interpreting our results.

The number of people with no college education fell considerably over the period we study. Therefore, the relative social and economic position of people with no college education at the end of the period of analysis is not directly comparable to that of people with a similar educational attainment at the beginning of the period. To address this, we standardize the Black and white educational groups to 2015. The adjusted educational groups represent people who would have completed no years of college in 2015 given their observed rank in the education distribution each year, and people who would have completed at least one year of college in 2015 given their observed rank in the education distribution in each year. As a result, our approach compares fixed proportions of the educational attainment distribution across years. Online [Appendix B](#) describes our method of adjustment in greater detail and presents unadjusted results that are very similar to the main adjusted results.

The top left panel of [figure 1](#) plots the estimated prison admission rate of the four categories of people we study. Several features of the plot stand out. First, and most noticeably, the prison admission rate of Black people with no college education was much higher than that of the other three categories of people throughout the duration of the period. It rose to a peak of 4,494 people per hundred thousand in 2000. Despite recent changes, Black people with low levels of education continue to be admitted to prison at much higher rates than any other group. Second, the Black no-college admission rate fell substantially from its peak in 2000 to 2,511 per hundred thousand in 2015. The beginning of the twenty-first century thus marked a turning point in the prison admission rate of Black people with low levels of education. Third, as the prison admission rate of Black people with no college education was falling, the prison admission rate of no-college white people was steadily rising. Recent scholarship has begun to document rising incarceration among white Americans ([Muller and Schrage 2014](#); [Subramanian et al. 2018](#); [Beckett and Brydolf-Horwitz 2020](#); [Sabol et al. 2020](#)), but, with few exceptions ([Oliver 2018](#)), the extent to which

Figure 1. Changes in racial and educational inequality in prison admissions in the United States in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries. Imprisonment data come from the National Corrections Reporting Program and [Bureau of Justice Statistics \(2017\)](#). Rates are calculated using the Current Population Survey Merged Outgoing Rotation Groups. “Any college” refers to people who completed at least one year of college, and “no college” to those who did not. Racial groups exclude Hispanic people. The analysis is restricted to people aged 20–39. Rates are standardized to the distribution of educational attainment in 2015. See [Online Appendix B](#) for details about the adjustment and for unadjusted rates.



this growth has been concentrated among those with little schooling has gone mostly unnoticed. Fourth, whereas the prison admission rate of white people with any college education stayed mostly stable, the rate for college-educated Black people fell from a peak of 755 per hundred thousand in 1990 to 113 per hundred thousand in 2015. Finally, the falling prison admission rate of Black people with any college education and the rising prison admission rate of white people with no college education created a widening gap between high-education Black Americans and low-education white Americans. These groups had similar prison admission rates in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but by 2015, white people with no college education were more than ten times as likely to be admitted to prison as Black people with any college education.

Decreases in the prison admission rate of Black people both with and without any college education and increases in the prison admission rate of white people with no college education combined to produce declining racial disparities in prison admissions in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries. The top right panel of [figure 1](#) shows that the Black–white ratio in prison admissions among people with any college education fell from a peak of almost nine in 1990 to less than three in 2015. The Black–white ratio for people with no college remained lower than that for college-educated people, falling from a peak of more than six in 1993 to two in 2015. Racial inequality in imprisonment continues to be extremely large, especially given that we are comparing people with the same levels of education. Moreover, some portion of the early-1990s peak in racial disparity in prison admissions likely reflects the drug war ([Wright and Rogers 2011](#), p. 291–292), as suggested by [Alexander \(2010\)](#). But, after spiking in the late 1980s and early 1990s, racial inequality in prison admissions fell markedly through the mid-2010s, and this trend occurred roughly equally across educational groups.

As racial inequality fell, educational inequality skyrocketed. The bottom panel of [figure 1](#) plots the no-college–any-college ratio in prison admissions from 1984 to 2015. In 1984, Black and white people with no college education were, respectively, 5.4 and 6.3 times more likely to be admitted to prison than those with any college education. By 2015, that number more than quadrupled for Black people, reaching 22. The rise among white people was even more dramatic: by 2015, white people with no college education were 28 times more likely to be imprisoned than white people with any college education. Notably, class inequality among Black people was driven by differences in the magnitude of shared declines in imprisonment, whereas class inequality among white people was marked by increases in imprisonment among people with no college education and decreases among people with any college education.

Previous scholarship has documented that in the late-twentieth century, racial and class inequality in imprisonment were both high, but class inequality was increasing while racial inequality was fairly stable ([Pettit and Western 2004](#); [Western 2006](#); [Pettit et al. 2009](#); [Western and Pettit 2010](#)). Our analysis shows that in the early-twenty-first century, racial inequality narrowed, while class inequality grew wider. Racial inequality in prison admissions fell among both those who had and had not completed at least one year of college, but the disparities were highest among the more educated. Between 1984 and 2015, class inequality grew more than fourfold among both Black and white Americans.

Inequality in the Imprisonment of a Family Member

The no-college–any-college ratio in prison admissions now greatly exceeds the comparable Black–white ratio. But the fact that upper- and middle-class Black Americans are more likely than comparable white Americans to have poor family

members makes it likely that racial and class inequality in people's risk of having a family member imprisoned will differ from racial and class inequality in their risk of being imprisoned themselves (Heflin and Pattillo 2006; Chetty et al. 2020; Bobo and Thompson 2010). In this section, we examine racial and class inequality in the imprisonment of family members, using education and income as proxies for class.

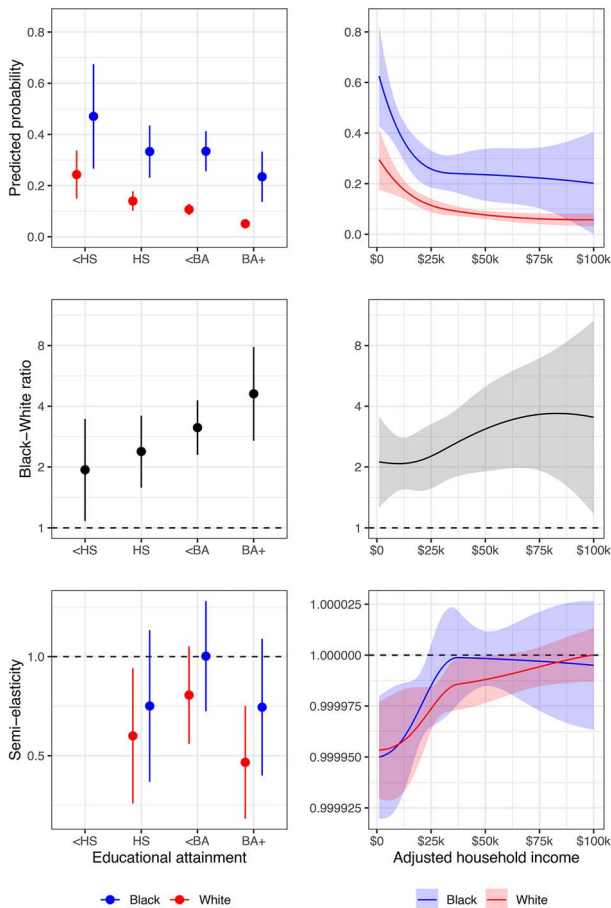
Recently released data from the Family History of Incarceration Survey (FamHIS) (Enns et al. 2019) enable us to measure the proportion of people who had ever had a family member incarcerated as of 2018, when FamHIS was fielded. FamHIS was specifically designed to measure family-member incarceration. The survey included 4,041 respondents and had a 34 percent response rate. All of the results we report are weighted to make them nationally representative of the US household population aged 18 and older in 2018.

We focus on the imprisonment of immediate family members, defined in the survey as parents, siblings, children, current spouses, current romantic partners, or people with whom the respondent had a child. Step, foster, and adoptive family members were included. Rather than ask respondents to identify whether their family member had been incarcerated in a prison or a jail, FamHIS assumed that family members incarcerated for over a year had been imprisoned (Enns et al. 2019). We restrict our focus to family members who had been incarcerated for more than a year to make our results comparable to the analysis of imprisonment in the previous section.

Information about FamHIS respondents' household income, educational attainment, and racial and ethnic identification comes from the AmeriSpeak panel, which is administered by NORC at the University of Chicago. Using detailed responses about educational attainment, we sort respondents into four educational groups: people without a high school diploma; people with a high school diploma but no college education; people with some college education but no bachelor's degree, including those with associate's degrees; and people with a bachelor's degree or higher. Respondents were asked to report their household income by choosing one of 18 income bins ranging from "less than \$5,000" to "\$200,000 or more." We assign them the middle value of the income range they report, with values of \$250,000 for the highest bin. We then divide this figure by the square root of the number of people in the respondent's household to adjust their household income by the size of their household (see, Johnson et al. 2005, p. 13). As in the previous section, we refer to people who identified as "white non-Hispanic" and "Black non-Hispanic" as "white people" and "Black people," respectively.

The left column of figure 2 reports estimates from a nonparametric model estimating the probability of family-member imprisonment among each racial and educational group. Black people's likelihood of experiencing the imprisonment of a family member remained higher than that of white people across the education distribution. The middle left panel shows that Black-white disparities in family-member imprisonment were greatest at the highest education levels.

Figure 2. The probability that Black and white non-Hispanic people ever had an immediate family member imprisoned, by educational attainment and income. Imprisonment is defined as incarceration for at least one year. Data ($N = 4,041$) come from the Family History of Incarceration Survey (Enns et al. 2019) and are representative of the US household population in 2018. Household income is adjusted to account for variation in household size. Ratios in the middle and bottom panels are displayed on a logarithmic scale for comparison. The left and right columns present estimates of separate nonparametric series regression models that measure class using data on education and income, respectively. Lines and points are estimates; bands and line ranges are 95 percent confidence intervals around the estimates, estimated using heteroskedasticity-consistent standard errors. The third row plots proportional changes in family-member imprisonment associated with unit changes in education or income. In ascending order, the educational attainment categories represent no high school diploma or equivalent; high school diploma or equivalent, no college; some college or associate's degree; and bachelor's degree or higher.



This finding parallels the fact that racial inequality in prison admissions is higher among the college educated, as shown in the top right panel of figure 1.

But an important difference between imprisonment and family-member imprisonment is also apparent. The top left panel of [figure 1](#) illustrates that in the 2010s, white people with no college education were much more likely than Black people with any college education to be imprisoned. In contrast, the top left panel of [figure 2](#) shows that white people with a high school diploma or less experienced the imprisonment of a family member at rates that were comparable to or lower than those of Black people with bachelor's degrees or more. Indeed, if we divide respondents into those with no college education and those with any college education, to mirror the analysis in the previous section, we find that racial disparities were greater than educational disparities in people's risk of having a family member imprisoned. The probability of family-member imprisonment was .29 among college-educated Black people and .16 among white people with no college education. Racial disparities, both among people with any college education (3.87:1) and among people with none (2.29:1), were larger than educational disparities among both white people (2.18:1) and Black people (1.29:1).

The bottom left panel of [figure 2](#) shows the proportional change in the probability of having a family member imprisoned associated with moving up one educational category. The two most important educational transitions for both groups were receiving a high school diploma and a bachelor's degree, both of which were associated with reductions in the likelihood of experiencing the imprisonment of a family member. But the difference across these education levels was largest for white people.

The upper right panel of [figure 2](#) shows that people's likelihood of having a family member imprisoned declined as their household income increased. But the relationship between income and family-member imprisonment was different for each group. The poorest Black people had an extremely high likelihood of having a family member imprisoned, and incomes at the poverty line were associated with much lower probabilities of family-member imprisonment. Above poverty levels, however, Black people's risk of family-member imprisonment varied little by household income, never falling below one in five. Black people with \$100,000 in adjusted household income had the same risk of having a family member imprisoned as white people with \$9,000 in adjusted household income. The declining returns to income for Black people can be seen most clearly in the bottom right panel of [figure 2](#), which plots the proportional change in the likelihood of having a family member imprisoned for each additional dollar in adjusted household income. For Black people, proportional decreases in family-member imprisonment became statistically insignificant at adjusted household incomes above \$24,000, just below the 2018 poverty line for a family of four. For white people, in contrast, increased income was associated with statistically significant decreases in the risk of family-member imprisonment up to adjusted household income levels of \$55,000.

Despite recent changes in racial and class inequality in people's risk of being imprisoned, racial inequality exceeds class inequality in people's risk of having a family member imprisoned. Both Black and white people's likelihood of having a family member imprisoned fell with increases in educational attainment and

household income, but for Black people the returns to income tapered off near the poverty line whereas for white people they continued into middle incomes. High-education and high-income Black people experienced the imprisonment of a family member at similar rates to low-education and low-income white people. This is in contrast to low-education white people's dramatically higher prison admission rate.

Inequality in Neighborhood Imprisonment

Previous sociological scholarship has shown that Black Americans are not only more likely than comparable white Americans to have poor family members—they are also more likely to live in poor neighborhoods (Pattillo-McCoy 1999; Pattillo 2005; Sharkey 2014). Because incarceration is highly concentrated in poor neighborhoods (Sampson and Loeffler 2010; Morenoff and Harding 2014; Simes 2018), racial and class inequality in neighborhood imprisonment should therefore differ from racial and class inequality in prison admissions. In this section, we examine racial and class inequality in people's likelihood of living in a neighborhood with a high imprisonment rate, again using education and income as proxies for class.

To estimate racial and class inequality in people's exposure to high-imprisonment neighborhoods, we use census tracts as a proxy for neighborhoods. We calculate census-tract imprisonment rates using data from the Justice Atlas of Sentencing and Corrections (Justice Mapping Center 2010). The Justice Atlas uses prisoners' pre-commitment residential address to calculate census tract-level counts of state prison admissions in 2008 for twenty states: Alaska, Arkansas, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, Nebraska, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Texas, and West Virginia. Admissions were originally geocoded to 2000 census tracts, so we use the Longitudinal Tract Database (Logan et al. 2014) to convert the counts to 2010 geographies. We then calculate the prison admission rate of each tract by dividing the admissions count by the total tract population aged 15 to 64, estimated using 5-year 2010 American Community Survey (ACS) data (Manson et al. 2019). We restrict the age range of the denominator to reflect the population generally at risk of imprisonment. Next, we divide tracts into four types based on their level of imprisonment: low imprisonment (the bottom half of all tracts), moderate imprisonment (the 50th to 75th percentiles), high imprisonment (the 75th to 95th percentiles), and very high imprisonment (the top five percent).

We then use ACS data to measure the distribution of the population across census tracts. To examine educational inequality, we calculate the number of people aged 25 years and older living in each tract, by racial identification and educational attainment. To examine income inequality, we calculate the number of households of each income quintile in each census tract, separately by the racial identification of householders. We calculate income quintiles using

the entire US household population. Finally, we calculate the share of each racial–education and racial–income group that resides in each type of census tract (low, moderate, high, and very high imprisonment).

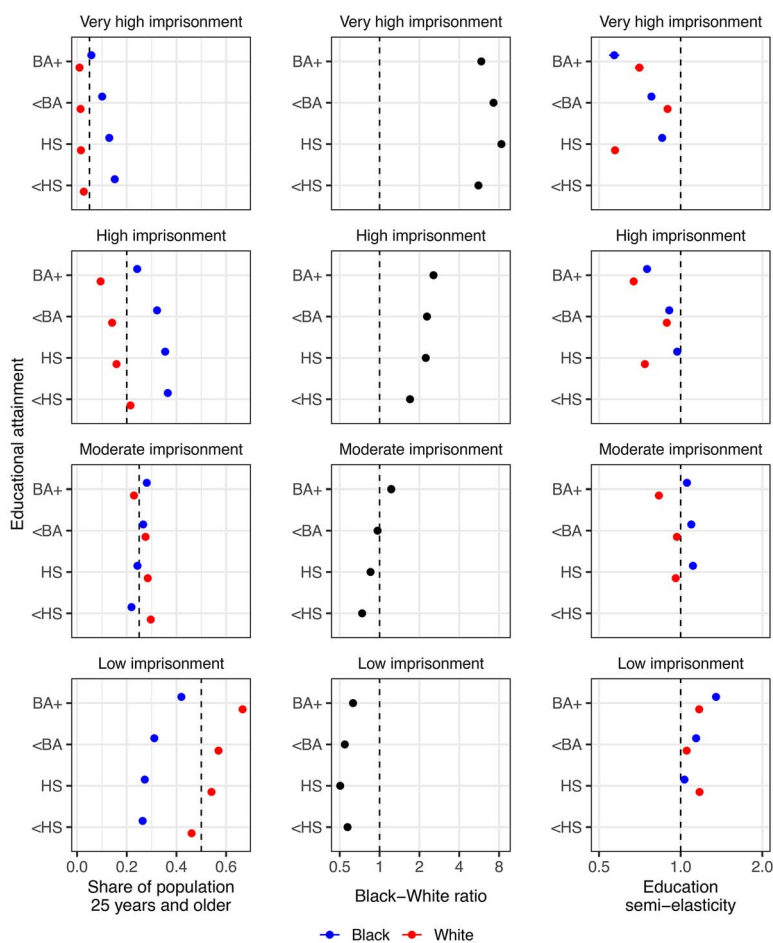
The left column of [figure 3](#) plots the share of people 25 years and older residing in low-, moderate-, high-, and very high-imprisonment neighborhoods, separately for each racial–educational group. The plot is complex, so it is worth pausing to explain it. The lowermost blue point in the top left panel, for example, indicates that 15 percent of Black people with less than a high school degree lived in the five percent of census tracts with the highest imprisonment rates. As we move up the distribution of educational attainment, we see that a smaller share of each education group resides in neighborhoods with the highest imprisonment rates. The bottom left panel of [figure 3](#) shows that the opposite is true of the lowest imprisonment neighborhoods. In each panel, we draw a dashed line to indicate the proportion of all neighborhoods belonging to each of the four levels of neighborhood imprisonment. Assuming that tracts contain roughly equal numbers of residents, a racially and educationally equal distribution of the population across neighborhood types would result in all the points aligning on the dashed lines.

Our analysis of educational inequality in prison admissions showed that low-education white people are admitted to prison at drastically higher rates than high-education Black people. However, the left column of [figure 3](#) shows that the highest-education Black people had more than twice the likelihood of living in a very high-imprisonment neighborhood than the lowest-education white people. Black people with a bachelor's degree or more were also more likely than white people who did not complete high school to live in high-imprisonment neighborhoods and less likely than the lowest education white people to live in low-imprisonment neighborhoods.

If we divide respondents into those with no college and any college education to mirror the analysis in the first empirical section, we find that, on average, white people with and without a college education lived in neighborhoods with imprisonment rates of 166 and 213 per 100,000, respectively, whereas Black people with and without a college education lived in neighborhoods with imprisonment rates of 402 and 534 per 100,000, respectively. Educational disparities, both among white people (1.29:1) and among Black people (1.33:1) were smaller than racial disparities among people with any college education (2.42:1) and people with none (2.50:1).

The center column of [figure 3](#) plots the Black–white ratio of the likelihood of residence in each neighborhood type, by educational attainment. Racial inequality in people's likelihood of living in a very high-imprisonment neighborhood was the most severe: Black people of all levels of education resided in these neighborhoods at least five times the rate of comparable white people. Educational inequality in people's risk of residing in a neighborhood with a very high imprisonment rate, in contrast, was about half as large: Black and white people without a high school diploma were, respectively, 2.6 and 2.7 times more likely to live in very high-imprisonment neighborhoods than those with bachelor's degrees. The right column of [figure 3](#) shows the ratio of the likelihood

Figure 3. The share of the US population 25 years and older in 2006–2010 residing in neighborhoods with different levels of imprisonment, by educational attainment and racial identification. Points are estimates and line ranges are 95 percent confidence intervals around the estimates; most line ranges are not visible because the confidence intervals are very small. Ratios in the middle and right panels are displayed on a logarithmic scale for comparison. Neighborhoods are measured as census tracts ($N = 37,988$). The Black racial category includes Hispanic people. Neighborhood imprisonment rates are calculated using geocoded prison admissions data from The Justice Atlas of Sentencing and Corrections (Justice Mapping Center 2010), and residence shares are calculated using 5-year 2010 American Community Survey (ACS) data (Manson et al. 2019). Measured uncertainty results from ACS sampling error. “Low” imprisonment neighborhoods are neighborhoods with imprisonment rates in the bottom 50 percent; “moderate,” “high,” and “very high” imprisonment neighborhoods are, respectively, neighborhoods falling between the 50th and 75th, 75th and 95th, and 95th and 100th percentiles.



of residence in each neighborhood type for each educational group compared to the group immediately below.

Figure 4 mirrors figure 3, evaluating income inequality rather than educational inequality in people's likelihood of living in neighborhoods with high and low rates of imprisonment. The patterns reported in the two figures are very similar. The richest Black households were more likely to live in high- and very high-imprisonment neighborhoods than the poorest white households. Black and white people in the first income quintile were, respectively, 3.8 and 3.9 times likelier than their counterparts in the fifth income quintile to live in very high-imprisonment neighborhoods, whereas Black households of all income quintiles were between 5.6 and 6.8 times likelier to reside in these neighborhoods than comparable white households.

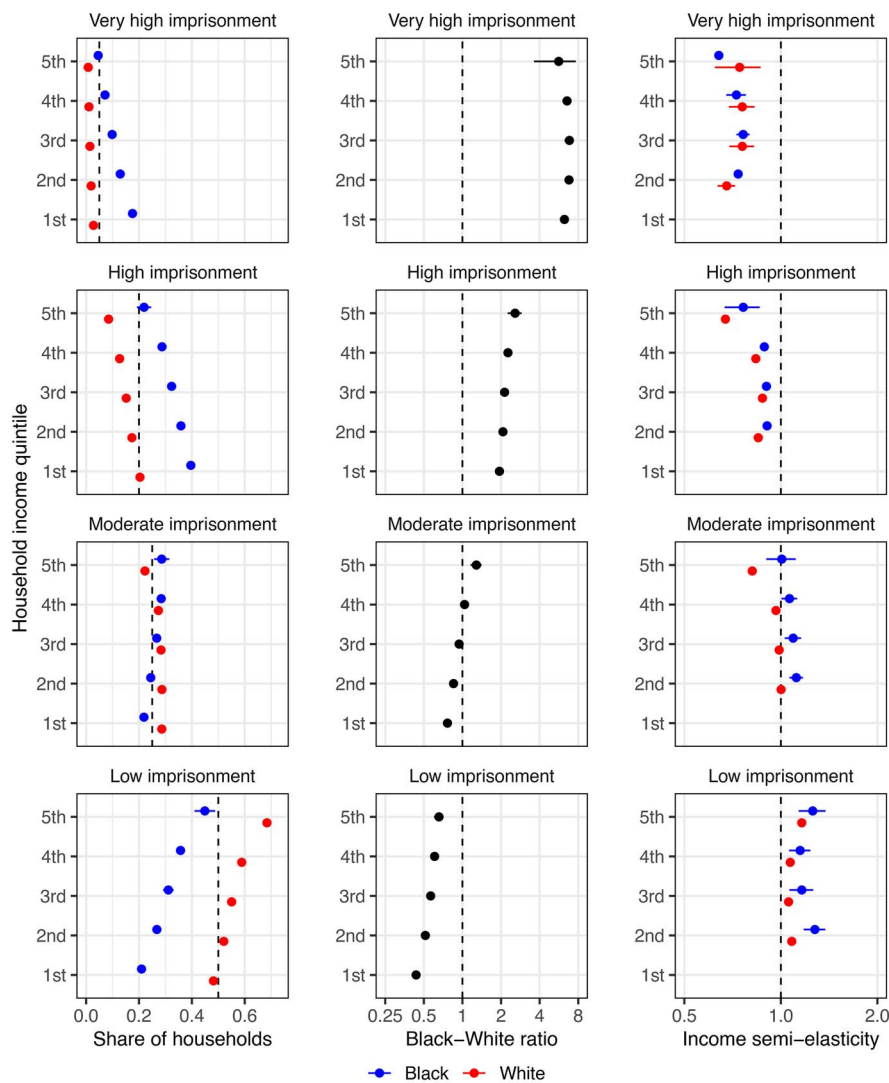
As with the experience of having a family member imprisoned, racial inequality was greater than class inequality in the experience of living in a neighborhood with a high imprisonment rate. Across all educational categories and income quintiles, racial gaps in people's likelihood of living in a very high-imprisonment neighborhood were larger than gaps between the most and least educated people and between the richest and poorest households. Although in 2008 the prison admission rate of Black people with any college education was much lower than that of white people with no college education, college-educated Black people were more likely than white people with no college education to live in neighborhoods with high or very high rates of imprisonment.

Limitations

Our analysis has several important limitations. The first concerns imperfections in the data we use to calculate racial and class inequality in neighborhood imprisonment rates. These data are limited in two relevant ways. First, the Justice Atlas measures neighborhood imprisonment with some error. State corrections agencies may have failed to report some admissions, and 5 to 25 percent of reported admissions had missing or unusable address information. Second, the Justice Atlas comprises a nonrepresentative sample of states. These limitations may bias our estimates or make them ungeneralizable. Online Appendix C discusses these limitations in detail, and presents results using an alternative source of incarceration data (Chetty et al. 2018) that are consistent with the main results.

A second limitation is that the way we measure inequality in family-member imprisonment differs from the way we measure inequality in prison admissions and neighborhood prison admissions. As noted above, the prison admission rate is a flow that changes every year. In contrast, whether a person has ever had a family member imprisoned reflects recent prison admissions and prison admissions that took place many years ago. However, two sources of evidence suggest that the divergence of our findings about racial and class inequality in prison admissions, neighborhood prison admissions, and family-member imprisonment is not an artifact of measurement. First, our findings about

Figure 4. The share of US households in 2006–2010 residing in neighborhoods with different levels of imprisonment, by household income quintile and the racial identification of householders. Points are estimates and line ranges are 95 percent confidence intervals around the estimates; most line ranges are not visible because the confidence intervals are very small. Household residence shares are calculated using 5-year 2010 American Community Survey data (Manson et al. 2019). See the caption of Figure 3 for additional details.



family-member imprisonment closely mirror our findings about neighborhood imprisonment, which are based on a flow measure. Second, as we show in Online

[Appendix C](#), using a stock measure of neighborhood imprisonment yields similar results to the main analysis.

A third limitation is that our analysis centers exclusively on Black-white and class inequality in imprisonment. Future research should examine additional forms of contact with police, courts, jails, and prisons ([Hepburn et al. 2019](#)) and additional dimensions of inequality. Recent research on jails indicates that the decline in racial inequality in imprisonment that we document has not been offset by increasing Black jail incarceration rates: the white jail incarceration rate steadily increased between 1990 and 2013, particularly in rural areas and small cities, whereas the Black jail incarceration rate recently began to fall ([Subramanian et al. 2018](#)). Racial inequality in federal sentencing has also markedly declined ([Light 2021](#)). How the trends we describe differ across rural and urban America ([Eason et al. 2017](#); [Oliver 2018](#); [Beckett and Beach 2020](#); [Gottschalk 2020](#)), across other racial groups, and across other educational divides are important subjects for future investigation. Scholars should also study changes in gender inequality in incarceration ([Sabol et al. 2020](#)).

The most important limitation of our analysis, however, is that there is a historical dimension of racial inequality in incarceration that it does not capture. Black Americans have faced brutal and unequal treatment by police and courts at least since the end of Reconstruction: from the convict lease system ([Du Bois 1901](#); [Lichtenstein 1996](#); [Davis 1998](#); [Haley 2016](#); [Muller 2018](#)) through southern chain gangs ([Lichtenstein 1996](#); [Haley 2016](#)) and racist policing in the North ([Muhammad 2010](#); [Muller 2012](#); [Hinton 2016](#)). This history has left many Black people—both poor and not—distrustful of and estranged from police and courts ([Du Bois 1901](#); [Muller and Schrage 2014](#); [Bell 2017](#)). It has also given rise to a pernicious ideological association between “blackness and criminality” that negatively affects Black people irrespective of their class ([Davis 1998](#); [Wacquant 2001](#); [Muhammad 2010](#)). Even if racial inequality in incarceration were completely eliminated, it is likely that these historical effects would linger.

Conclusion

Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* (2010) drew widespread public attention to how mass incarceration and its attendant social and legal consequences have relegated vast numbers of people—particularly Black people—to a kind of second-class citizenship. It also sparked a debate about the relative importance of racial and class inequality in imprisonment. However, this debate has rested on an out-of-date and incomplete empirical foundation. In this paper, we have sought to strengthen that foundation.

We find that the rise in class inequality in prison admissions documented by [Western \(2006\)](#) and emphasized by [Forman Jr \(2012\)](#) and [Gottschalk \(2015\)](#) has intensified. Beginning in the twenty-first century, the prison admission rate of Black people with no college education began to decrease alongside that of college-educated Black people. Meanwhile, the prison admission rate of white

people with no college education steadily grew. This led to significant decreases in racial inequality in imprisonment and dramatic increases in educational inequality in imprisonment. In the late-twentieth century, the no-college–any-college disparity in prison admissions was comparable in magnitude to the Black–white disparity. By 2015, it was roughly ten times higher.

However, in recent years, racial inequality exceeded class inequality in people's likelihood of having a family member imprisoned or living in a high-imprisonment neighborhood. Although white people with no college education were more than ten times as likely as college-educated Black people to be admitted to prison in 2015, they were roughly half as likely to have a family member imprisoned. The average white person with no college education also lived in a neighborhood with an imprisonment rate about half as large as that of the average college-educated Black person.

Taken together, these findings offer theoretical, empirical, and political lessons. First, the concept of class permeability can help us to make sense of ongoing debates about the scale and salience of racial and class inequality in incarceration. Imprisonment in the United States is increasingly reserved for the poor. But because Black people are disproportionately connected to the poor through their families and neighborhoods, racial inequality has remained larger than class inequality in family-member and neighborhood imprisonment. Class inequality now exceeds racial inequality in prison admissions by much more than racial inequality exceeds class inequality in family-member and neighborhood imprisonment. But many more people are affected by having a family member imprisoned or by living in a neighborhood with a high imprisonment rate than are imprisoned themselves. This helps to explain why, despite the declining scale of racial inequality in prison admissions, incarceration remains such a salient part of the lives of many Black people in the United States.

The concept of class permeability also offers a concrete framework for studying the entanglement of racial and class inequality in domains beyond incarceration. By attending to the ways that racial and class inequality jointly affect not just people's individual circumstances, but also the structure of their social ties, we can better understand why patterns of inequality in people's direct experience sometimes diverge from patterns of inequality in their indirect experience. Future research should extend the study of racial inequality in class permeability to domains like mortality and wealth (O'Brien 2012; Umberson et al. 2017).

Second, although our primary objective has been to describe rather than to explain patterns in racial and class inequality in imprisonment, the trends we document should help to direct future research into their causes. Our findings underscore that understanding inequality in incarceration in the twenty-first century entails identifying mechanisms that generate class inequality, mechanisms that generate racial inequality, and how those mechanisms interrelate. The rise in class inequality in prison admissions among both Black and white people points to causes that have successively affected low-income and low-education members of both racial groups, such as under- and unemployment and the epidemics of crack cocaine and opioids (Wilson 1987; Autor et al. 2016; Case and Deaton

2020, 2021; Gottschalk 2020). Large racial inequality in family-member and neighborhood imprisonment suggests that persistent wealth gaps, differences in downward mobility, and residential segregation, ghettoization, and housing discrimination have contributed not only to racial inequality in imprisonment, but also to Black–white differences in class permeability (Massey and Denton 1993; Pattillo 2005; Wacquant 2012; Pfeffer and Killewald 2019; Chetty et al. 2020). Future research should also study the causes of the dramatic decline in imprisonment among Black people with no college education. Beckett and Brydolf-Horwitz (2020) suggest that the deescalation of the drug war in cities, where Black people disproportionately reside, may be one reason for falling racial inequality in imprisonment.

Finally, studying both class inequality and class permeability can inform our understanding of the composition of movements opposing mass incarceration. Imprisonment is increasingly concentrated among America’s poor—both Black and white—but its indirect effects are disproportionately felt by Black people, both poor and not. These facts are an indictment of the United States’ political economy, weak social policy, and enduring structures of racial domination. But they also may provide a material basis for broad coalitions aimed at ending our reliance on incarceration and fighting the poverty and inequality that sustain it (Gilmore 2007; Forman Jr 2012; Gottschalk 2015; Taylor 2016; Terry and Lee 2017).

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material is available at *Social Forces* online, <http://sf.oxfordjournals.org/>.

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