

Do high incarceration rates make people less likely to vote?

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Introduction

- The U.S. has the highest incarceration rate and the highest jail and prison population in the world.
- Approximately 5 million Americans were denied the right to vote in the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections due to previous convictions, with minorities disproportionately affected.
- Research shows that incarceration has many impacts on both individuals and their families.

Background

- Over two million Americans are currently in prison, and over six million citizens could not vote in the 2016 Presidential election due to restrictions prohibiting felons and ex-convicts.
- Economists have studied the effect of felon disenfranchisement laws have on individual voting and community voter turnout and have found contrasting results.
- Personal interactions with the criminal justice system were correlated with reduced levels of trust in government, voter registration, voting, and civic participation.

After controlling for demographic variables, incarceration has an *insignificant effect* on voter turnout.

However, the impacts of incarceration on voter turnout may operate through *other channels*, such as income and education.

Data:

Table 1 - Summary Statistics

	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Incarceration Rate (percent)	4,726	1.246	1.221	0.455	27.598
Total Incarcerated Population	4,726	749,841	2391.114	0.2	63190.38
Percent of Black inmates	3,065	27.91	22.76	0	96.43
Total Population age 15 - 64	4,726	77619.6	265325.8	58	6958134
Total Population Over 18	4,726	87581.83	268808	68	7854783
Total Population Over 25	4,726	74696.62	227515.5	67	6712079
College Graduates (percent)	4,726	12.995	5.49	0	43.036
High School Graduates (percent)	4,726	34.865	7.084	9.1	70.7
Population in Poverty (percent)	4,726	16.658	6.4532	3.4	51.2
Median Household Income (\$)	4,726	47150.46	12203.7	22045	118934
Mean Age (Years)	4,726	40.747	5.0076	22.8	67

Note: Mineral, CO was removed from the dataset due to incorrect population data. People incarcerated within a county are not counted as part of the population of that county.

Results:

Table 2 - OLS & County Fixed Effect Regression Results

Voter turnout	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Incarceration rate	-1.388*** (0.111)	-0.465*** (0.103)	-0.195 (0.100)	-0.204 (0.112)	2.448*** (0.345)	2.212*** (0.344)
High school graduate		0.564*** (0.0253)	0.350*** (0.0267)	0.185*** (0.0296)	-0.0195 (0.0379)	-0.0202 (0.0375)
College graduate		1.148*** (0.0334)	0.871*** (0.0416)	0.786*** (0.0459)	0.122 (0.0667)	0.0493 (0.0674)
Median household income (thousands)			-0.185*** (0.0198)	-0.0760*** (0.0214)	0.118*** (0.0198)	0.0228 (0.0267)
Population in poverty			-0.615*** (0.0328)	-0.404*** (0.0411)	0.0725 (0.0421)	0.105* (0.0421)
Mean age				0.818*** (0.0295)	0.271** (0.0863)	0.0871 (0.0922)
Percent of Black Inmates				0.0748*** (0.00606)	0.0242 (0.0182)	0.0384* (0.0182)
2016.year						0.909*** (0.172)
Time Fixed Effects						Y
County Fixed Effects						Y
_cons	58.04*** (0.193)	22.30*** (1.272)	52.01*** (2.070)	14.09*** (2.581)	32.41*** (3.675)	44.24*** (4.272)
N	4726	4726	4726	3065	3065	3065
adj. R ²	0.032	0.228	0.285	0.427	-1.087	-1.044

Standard errors in parentheses
* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Model

$$voterTurnout_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 incRate_{it} + \beta_2 colGradPct_{it} + \beta_3 hsGradPct_{it} + \beta_4 age_{it} + \beta_5 black_{it} + \beta_6 inc_{it} + \beta_7 povertyPercent_{it} + u$$

Conclusion

- Even though the effect of incarceration on voting is minimal, it should be further studied since these retributive justice approaches primarily target low-income citizens and minorities, revealing the discriminatory nature of the criminal justice system.
- Policymakers should promote reparative justice to help repair the discrimination that incarceration has caused minorities, such as lack of resources, racist encounters, and loss of employment and housing opportunities.

Full Paper:

