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## Public Assistance and Incarceration: A longitudinal Study

The theorist Donald Black proposed that law, or rather the utilization of formal social control, can be thought of as a quantitative variable that varies with other social phenomenon. Building from this theoretical framework, research has been conducted on the direct effects of incarceration and public assistance on crime; however, the effect of public assistance on incarceration has yet to be adequately explored.

The same needs that lead to arrest and incarceration (poverty, social inequality, mental illness) are related to welfare needs and other forms of public assistance. Therefore, thinking of public assistance and incarceration as potential ways of addressing the same social problems, they may vary in accordance with the other's utilization. Stated simply, the utilization of public assistance, if available, may supersede that of incarceration. Thus, reduced incarceration may be the indirect product of public assistance programs. What complicates this relationship is other forms of major public spending and how they interact with incarceration.

Public assistance spending does not exist in a vacuum. Other major county level spending may have an effect on incarceration. In particular, public protection spending, which includes police, courts, and jail/prisons, will be explored as it relates to public assistance spending. Previous research has shown that the rise of punitive measures over welfare may be a contributing factor to increased incarceration. To account for this interaction, assistance and protection spending will be examined together in relation to incarceration. This is necessary in order to disentangle assistance and protection spending and discover what the independent effects of them are on incarceration.

Taking a macro approach, I will use county level data to explore the relationship between public assistance and incarceration. My guiding question is as follows:

“In what ways, if any, does the utilization of public assistance spending have an effect on incarceration. Can changes in public assistance spending be mapped onto changes in the rate of incarceration? If so, what is the size of this effect?”

### Data Collection:

I have sourced data from public records and publicly published datasets. Due to the nature of the study, panel data is required in order to identify trends, create lagged variables, and conduct certain forms of regression. Because of this, I selected a time series from 1995 to 2015. This is a useful time period for the state of California due to variability in the incarcerated population and rapid changes in state and county policy during this time period.

Currently, data for the state of California has been located for public assistance and protection spending through the California Comptroller's office. Arrest and incarceration data

was taken from the California Jail Profile Survey (JPS). County level population and demographic data, both for the incarcerated and general populations, was sourced from a VERA published data set, with supplemental data from the American Community Survey (ACS) and the USDA for economic indicators. Other county level control variables/potential variables of interest were sourced from Open Justice, a state of California initiative to provide governmental transparency. Open Justice and VERA data will also be used to supplement arrest and incarceration data.

Data collection has been limited to the state of California; however, due to low variability in key variables, I am considering widening the study to include Texas. Texas incarceration data is available through VERA, and can be verified with other sources. Financial data, including assistance and protection spending is available, but is not aggregated the same way as the California data. The Texas data will need to be explored further before an evaluation can be made.

#### Methods:

The primary focus of this study is a quantitative analysis of county level incarceration and spending data. Due to county level variation such as population, geographic location and demographics, control variables will be used to allow for a comparison between counties and within counties over time. Due to the nature of incarceration and public assistance, it is unlikely that public assistance spending has an instantaneous and complete effect on incarceration. I will explore a couple of varied regression models in order to account for this. The first is a simple lagged fixed effects model. To deal with time invariant factors, a fixed effects model will be used; this is appropriate because the main explanatory variable (county assistance spending) varies between years. Incarceration will be regressed on public assistance spending and lagged public assistance spending. The second model will use a partial adjustment designed to account for the anchoring of the incarceration rate to the previous year's rate. This is theoretically informed by the carrying over of sentences between years, and the tendency for incarceration to hover near the maximum capacity of facilities. Thus, changes in incarceration will have a limited adjustment based upon the rate of the previous year. The third model is a growth curve model. Jail populations have prevailing trends over time, thus counties may be separated by trend direction and the trends estimated. This form of modeling is useful because it recognizes that counties may have different growth trajectories and that assistance spending may have varied effects based upon these trends.

#### Summer Lit Preview

This is a preview of lit that may be relevant to my study. Limited information is available for the connection between assistance and incarceration (Beckett & Western is the only direct study). Most studies focus on the link between welfare and crime or crime and incarceration.

Beckett K., & Western, B. (2001). Governing Social Marginality. *Punishment & Society*, 3(1), 43-59.

Governing social mobility:

This paper provides a theoretical link between welfare and incarceration. Findings include an analysis of between county differences; they show that counties with less public assistance tend to turn to higher rates of incarceration. Useful for identifying a clear link between assistance and incarceration and a suggested mechanism of action (the rise of punitive measures vs declining welfare).

Worrall, John. (2005). Reconsidering the Relationship Between Welfare Spending and Serious Crime. *Justice Quarterly*, 22(3), 364-391.

Reconsidering the Relationship Between Welfare Spending and Serious Crime:

This paper questions the link between serious crime and welfare spending. Though they do not find evidence for a direct effect on serious crime, they do provide a discussion of mechanisms of action and a good statistical model. They used a fixed effects model similar to the one I am considering for this study so their methods section is useful.

Savolainen, Jukka. (2000). Inequality, Welfare State, and Homicide. *Criminology*, 38(4) 1021-1041

Inequality, Welfare State, and Homicide:

Their paper draws a negative relationship between Welfare and economic inequality. They then link economic equality to violent crime. This is useful because it is an international study that provides evidence that nations with a more robust welfare states have less inequality and less violent crime.

Chamlin, Mitchel, John Cachran and Christopher Lowenkamo. (2002). A longitudinal Analysis of the Welfare-Homicide Relationship. *Homicide Studies* 6(1), 39-61

A longitudinal Analysis of the Welfare-Homicide Relationship:

Their study provides limited evidence for a negative relationship between welfare and homicide. They theorize that social bond may have an effect on crime and that welfare may provide the conditions for altruistic beliefs that will limit crime.

DeFronzo, James. (1996). Welfare and Burglary. *Crime & Delinquency*, 42(2), 223-230

Welfare and Burglary:

They provides evidence that monthly welfare payments are correlated with a reduction in burglary. This paper is useful because other papers had focused on homicide/violent crime exclusively. Defronzo argues this is due to a reduction in strain that occurs with the existence of welfare programs. This is a potential theoretical framework to build the public assistance argument, reduction in strain leads to reduced crime and reduced incarceration.

