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## Rural/Urban Differences in Inmate Perceptions of the Punitiveness of Prison: Does Having Children Make Prison More Punitive

Kecia R. Johnson  
*Mississippi State University*, [kjohnson@soc.msstate.edu](mailto:kjohnson@soc.msstate.edu)

David C. May  
*Mississippi State University*, [dmay@soc.msstate.edu](mailto:dmay@soc.msstate.edu)

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**RURAL/URBAN DIFFERENCES IN INMATE PERCEPTIONS OF THE  
PUNITIVENESS OF PRISON: DOES HAVING CHILDREN MAKE  
PRISON MORE PUNITIVE?\***

**KECIA R. JOHNSON**

*MISSISSIPPI STATE UNIVERSITY*

and

**DAVID C. MAY**

*MISSISSIPPI STATE UNIVERSITY*

ABSTRACT

Many researchers have argued that an inmate's relationship with their family is an important determinant of their behavior while incarcerated and their success in the community upon release from prison. Nevertheless, no research of which we are aware examines the impact of an inmate's parental involvement on their perception of the punitiveness of prison while incarcerated or whether this impact varies between prisoners raised in rural or urban areas. The current study used exchange rates from more than twelve hundred incarcerated prisoners to examine this relationship. Our findings suggest that whether an inmate has a child has almost no impact on their perception of the punitiveness of prison, no matter whether the inmate was raised in a rural or urban area. The findings further suggest that the well-documented impact of age on perceived punitiveness of prison might be largely important among prisoners from rural areas. Implications for future research are also discussed.

America has been on an incarceration binge for many years. The Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that the number of persons under supervision of adult correctional authorities at the end of 2013 was almost seven million with more than 1.5 million inmates housed in state and federal prisons (Glaze & Kaeble 2014; Kaeble et al. 2015). The United States houses a greater proportion of its citizens in prisons than any other country in the world. Many of these prisoners are parents. The number of parents incarcerated in state and federal prisons increased by 79% during the period between 1991 and 2007 (Glaze and Maruschak 2008). Nationally, there are more than 120,000 incarcerated mothers and 1.1 million incarcerated

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fathers who are the parents of minor children ages 0-17 (Glaze and Maruschak 2011; National Resource Center on Children & Families of the Incarcerated 2014).

Due to the high rate of parental incarceration, a major challenge these parents face during their time in prison is the potential disruption of relationships and communication with the outside world, especially with the family (Western and McClanahan 2000). Social ties are an integral part of human nature, particularly the relationships between inmates and their families (Casey-Acevedo and Bakken 2002). Thus, the relationships the inmate had before incarceration, during incarceration, and upon release are important factors in the lives of the inmate and their families. Within the field of corrections, it has long been held that contacts with family and friends (e.g., letters, telephone calls and visitation) are essential for helping inmates adjust both during confinement and after their release (Harriston 1998). Maintaining family ties can assist by normalizing the inmate's lifestyle and his or her perception of being part of a family unit. Although incarceration presents challenges to the family unit, the role of the family is important for inmates, especially those who are parents.

While several studies examine the detrimental impacts of incarceration on both the inmate and their children, no known research considers whether the impacts vary by whether the inmate had a rural or urban upbringing. In fact, research examining the impact of rurality on incarceration has largely been limited to two areas: research that examines the decision-making processes of those who choose to locate prisons in rural counties (e.g., Genter, Hooks, and Mosher 2013) and research examining rural/urban differences in substance abuse and treatment (e.g., Warner and Leukefeld 2001). Furthermore, despite a large body of research that examines demographic predictors of inmates' perceptions of the punitiveness of prison (see May and Wood 2010, for review), no research of which we are aware examines rural and urban differences in those perceptions.

Thus, the purposes of this paper are threefold. In this paper, we investigate whether having a child influences an inmate's perceptions of the severity of prison compared with alternative sanctions. We then examine rural/urban differences in this association. Finally, this research extends the literature of offenders' perceptions of punitiveness by examining rural/urban differences in the impact of several demographic variables on the amount of alternative sanctions inmates will endure to avoid one year of imprisonment.

## INMATE PERCEPTIONS OF THE PUNITIVENESS OF PRISON 37

*Incarceration and Family Disruption*

While there are many families affected by incarceration, the research around the negative impacts of parental incarceration is a growing literature investigated from the perspective of the inmate as well as the perspective of children, caregivers and other family relatives. Many inmates with children experience parental stress due to the dissolution of the family unit (Arditti, Smock and Parkman 2005). Parental stress refers to difficulties coping with the demands of attaching to and competently parenting children (Loper et al. 2009). Research suggests that incarcerated women often experience guilt associated with the crimes they committed and the consequences of leaving their children behind. For these women, the inability to provide parenting for their children while incarcerated also leads to feelings of depression and maternal distress (Arditti and Few 2008).

In a study of incarcerated parents, Loper et al. (2009) examined the parenting stress and adjustment patterns of 100 incarcerated mothers and 111 incarcerated fathers in 11 U.S. prisons. In comparison to inmate mothers, fathers had less contact with children, higher levels of parenting stress, and a weaker alliance with caregivers. Inmate mothers who communicated more with their children also had less parental stress when compared with inmate fathers who communicated regularly with their children.

Tuerk and Loper (2006) examined parenting stress between incarcerated mothers and their children. A total of 357 incarcerated mothers at a maximum-security prison were given the parenting stress index for incarcerated women (PSI-IW) (Houck and Loper 2002). The study examined contact before incarceration and the frequency of telephone, letter, and visitation contact during incarceration. Their results suggested that higher levels of contact between mothers and their children were associated with reduced levels of parenting stress. In addition, mothers who were responsible for their child's care before incarceration were more likely to maintain communication via telephone, letters, or visitations while incarcerated. In particular, letter writing during incarceration was associated with increased attachment and an improved sense of paternal competence (Tuerk and Loper 2006).

In a qualitative study of incarcerated fathers, Arditti et al. (2005) found that men described themselves as a "bad" father based upon their inability to be available or at least "pay attention" to their children. A 42-year-old father compared incarcerated fatherhood to childhood neglect: "To me it is obvious it is neglect because I'm not there. I'm not available to my children" (Arditti et al. 2005, p. 276). Most men in this study were concerned with their inability to carry out fathering

functions and/or their loss of control of their children due to their own incarceration. For the men who expressed this loss of control, they perceived this loss as stripping a man of his fathering identity (Arditti et al. 2005).

However, some study participants saw things differently. These participants defined themselves as better fathers while incarcerated than when they were out of prison. For example, an inmate who was completing a 42-month sentence stated: “My opinions of being a father have changed. I’ve gone from not really wanting to be [a father] to knowing that I am and being a father” (Arditti et al. 2005, p. 277). Sometimes, inmates discussed their fatherhood roles in terms of what they hoped to do upon release from prison. This futuristic notion of fatherhood was expressed by 10 of the study participants. Most of these fathers used the expressions of “starting over and getting things right with their children,” or “being there for their children.” Overall these fathers had reflected on their impending rebirth as a “good father” or “better father” (Arditti et al. 2005, p. 283).

Although the previously mentioned research focused on the parental incarceration from the perspective of the offender, several researchers have examined how incarceration disrupts the parent-child bond and harms the social and emotional well-being of children (Arditti et al. 2003; Arditti et al. 2005; Krupat, Gaynes and Lincroft 2011). Researchers suggest that incarceration is more detrimental than divorce and other forms of parent-child separation because most unmarried fathers maintain contact with their children (Tach, Mincy, and Edin 2010) and are involved in daily activities and routines of their offspring (Waller and Swisher 2006); prisoners do not have this ability. Furthermore, parental incarceration has been recognized by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as an “adverse childhood experience” (ACE). This distinction is based upon a measure of childhood trauma used to examine the long term negative mental health and health outcomes for children of incarcerated parents (Krupat et al. 2011). Parental incarceration differs from other risk factors due to the unique trauma, shame, and stigma associated with having a parent in prison. Thus, negative consequences for child development occur because of limited interactions of between the incarcerated parent and their child.

Kjellstrand and Eddy (2011) used longitudinal data gathered as part of the Linking the Interests of Families and Teachers (LIFT) project to compare adolescents who had an incarcerated parent during childhood to those who did not. Four domains were examined: family social advantage, parent health, parenting strategies of families, and youth externalizing behaviors. Their results suggested

## INMATE PERCEPTIONS OF THE PUNITIVENESS OF PRISON 39

that past parental incarceration was associated with lower family income, lower parental socioeconomic status, and poorer parental health. Moreover, their research also demonstrated that families in which parents had been incarcerated had higher levels of parental depression, inconsistent discipline, youth problem behaviors, and serious delinquency.

Aaron and Dallaire (2010) examined an archival data set of children aged 10-14 years and their parents/guardians that reported their children's risk experiences (e.g., poverty, parental substance abuse), family processes (e.g., family conflict) and children's delinquent behaviors at two times. Parents also reported their incarceration history. The analyses showed that parental incarceration increased the likelihood of abuse in the family and increased the delinquent behaviors of both the child under study and their older siblings. More recent parental incarceration also increased family conflict, family victimization, and children's delinquency.

Although the research reviewed above indicates several negative impacts of parental incarceration, parental incarceration can also be associated with positive child behavioral outcomes. For example, when the inmate was not interacting with their child before incarceration, a father's incarceration may have little impact on the child (Geller et al. 2012). One-half of the fathers jailed were not living with their children before incarceration (Johnson and Waldfogel 2002); thus, the effects of incarceration may be mitigated (or nonexistent) for those children. In addition, daughters may be less affected by the father's incarceration given that fathers are typically less involved with the lives of their daughters (Geller et al. 2012). Incarceration may even benefit some children by removing an abusive or an illegal drug trafficking father from the home and additionally, the father's incarceration may have a deterrent effect on the children (Edin, Nelson and Paranal 2004).

Incarceration does not only affect father-son and/or father-daughter relationships. A growing number of women have entered prisons for drug offenses, larceny, and fraud (Carson and Sabol 2012; Casey-Acevedo and Bakken 2002). During their incarceration, these mothers attempt to maintain and sustain positive relationships with their family and children. Through the assistance and social support provided by family members, incarcerated mothers still function as parents and may often provide a positive influence on their children (Smyth 2012).

### *Incarceration and Rurality*

The dominant discourse on the subject of incarceration has largely been framed as a social problem within urban communities. However, attention should be given

to studying the experiences of offenders who, before incarceration, resided in rural communities. To fully understand the consequences of incarceration for rural offenders, one needs to understand the factors that make rural life distinct from non-rural life by answering the question “what is rural?” (Weisheit and Donnermeyer 2000). Moving beyond the traditional definitions of rural that focus on population counts, Donnermeyer and DeKeseredy (2014) state that rural areas are characterized by four common factors: (1) smaller proportion sizes and/or densities, (2) higher densities of acquaintanceship, (3) less autonomy (4) and communities influenced by external cultural, economic and social forces. Drawing upon this definition allows researchers to address how these communities and the people who live in these communities are affected by the rural context. When examining rural areas, the idea of these areas being homogenous has to be abandoned. Rural areas should be viewed as places that consist of a diverse array of people, places, and cultures (Weisheit and Donnermeyer 2000; Wodhal 2006).

Due to the small population size and isolation from non-rural communities, rural residents are less likely to have access to the same level of private and public services as their non-rural counterparts (Wodhal 2006). Rural residents have been characterized as less supportive of public programs and often resist government assistance because they often deal with problems on their own (Weisheit and Donnermeyer 2000). In smaller communities, residents often have fewer employment opportunities or the communities are dominated by a single industry, such as farming. Typically, the traditional rural industry jobs have been replaced with service sector, low-skilled and low paying jobs (Beichner and Rabe-Hemp 2014; Wodhal 2006). Thus, rural residents often earn less than non-rural residents. Consequently, lower wages translate into less income and spending in rural communities and limits the tax base of elected officials.

Moreover, rural areas have high levels of acquaintance density; most people in rural communities know one another. Usually, having higher levels of acquaintance density may be considered beneficial to rural residents, because living in a close-knit community where problems are addressed informally may be attractive to people. Conversely, there may be certain situations in which the lack of anonymity may be detrimental to rural residents. If this argument is extended to rural offenders incarcerated, having ties to a community where everyone is aware of the circumstances concerning their incarceration can be extremely difficult. Not only could the offender experience difficulty, but the offender’s family members who remain in the community may also experience courtesy stigma (Goffman 1963) and

## INMATE PERCEPTIONS OF THE PUNITIVENESS OF PRISON 41

shame due to having a family member incarcerated. Nevertheless, the differences between the prison experience of rural and urban inmates have been ignored; in fact, with two exceptions, little corrections research examines rural variables at all.

*Research in Rural/Non-rural Differences in Incarceration*

A review of the current academic literature on rural/non-rural differences in incarceration revealed a small body of research. The articles published in scholarly journals that we could uncover in that search are presented in Appendix A. This research can largely be categorized in two bodies of research. The first (and smaller) body of research examines differences in substance use between rural and non-rural offenders, since surveys of incarcerated offenders and arrestees report high rates of both alcohol and drug use among this population (Warner and Leukefeld 2001). Mumola and Karberg (2006) used data from the 2004 Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities to determine that 83% of state prisoners reported past drug use and 56% reported using drugs in the month before their offense. Nearly 72% of drug offenders in state prison reported drug use in the month before their offense (Mumola and Karberg 2006). In a study of substance use and treatment utilization of 377 inmates who were incarcerated in three medium-security and one minimum security prisons in Kentucky, 58% of the respondents were from a non-rural place, 34% were from rural communities, and 8% were from very rural places. When examining drug use in the 30 days before incarceration, respondents from non-rural places used cocaine more frequently than respondents from rural places. Rural respondents were more likely to use sedatives and multiple drugs than their non-rural counterparts. Rural substance abusing offenders were also less likely to seek help than non-rural substance abusing offenders. These findings suggest that rural drug users should be targeted for treatment while under correctional supervision (Warner and Leukefeld 2001). Despite an extensive literature concerning rural and non-rural differences in substance abuse, more attention should be given to understanding the influence of living in rural and non-rural areas before incarceration for offenders. This understudied comparison may have implications for how inmates adapt to prison and cope with leaving their children and families behind.

A second (and much larger) area of study where researchers have explored rurality and incarceration examines the widely acknowledged finding that prisons (at both the state and federal level) are more likely to be located in rural communities. Although several researchers now question the economic impact of

prison building in a local community (see Genter et al. 2013, and King, Mauer, and Huling 2003, for review), many legislators still work hard to secure state and/or federal prisons for their rural communities with the hope that a prison will produce jobs and other economic benefits for that community.

Except for these two subjects (and one article on prisoner reentry in rural areas discussed later), scant correctional research has considered how rural areas differ from urban areas in their impact on recidivism, or how inmates from rural areas experience prison life in comparison to their urban counterparts. Thus, the impact of rurality on corrections is an area that requires much greater exploration.

#### *Exchange Rates and Measurement of the Perceptions of the Punitiveness of Prison*

Several previous studies have examined differences in inmate perceptions of alternative sanctions in comparison to a prison sentence (see Applegate 2014 and May and Wood 2010, for review). Alternative sanctions are an important component of the correctional system because they are less expensive than incarceration, offer a better chance of rehabilitation and reintegration for many offenders, and have the potential to reduce prison overcrowding. Additionally, convicted offenders sentenced to alternative sanctions instead of prison avoid the negative impacts of prison and allow those individuals to maintain positive contacts with family and community. Gauging the punitiveness of alternative sanctions as opposed to prison helps develop punishment “equivalencies” between non-custodial and custodial sanctions (Byrne, Lurigio, and Petersilia 1992; Morris and Tonry 1990; Petersilia 1990; May and Wood, 2010).

To compare the punitiveness of alternative sanctions with the prison experience, May, Wood, and colleagues have developed a method they describe as “exchange rates” to rank perceived punitiveness of various correctional alternatives when compared with prison. In this method, the respondent is given a description of a variety of correctional sanctions and is asked to indicate how many months of each sanction they would be willing to serve to avoid 12 months in a medium-security correctional facility. These exchange rates allow researchers to compare perceptions of the punitiveness of non-custodial sanctions compared with prison across a variety of offender groups (including prisoners, probationers and parolees), probation/parole officers, judges, and the public (May and Wood 2010).

Led by May, Wood, and their colleagues, researchers now recognize that offenders’ perceptions of punitiveness or severity of criminal sanctions are more complex than previously assumed (e.g., McClelland and Alpert 1985; Petersilia

## INMATE PERCEPTIONS OF THE PUNITIVENESS OF PRISON 43

1990; May and Wood 2010; Spelman 1995; Wood and Grasmick 1999; Wood and May 2003). Researchers have established that males, Blacks, older inmates, and inmates with longer incarceration histories are willing to serve significantly less time in prison than their female, white, younger, and less experienced counterparts (Apospori and Alpert 1993; Crouch 1993; May et al. 2004; May and Wood 2005; May et al. 2005; Petersilia and Deschenes 1994a, 1994b; Spelman 1995; Wood and Grasmick 1999; Wood and May 2003).

Despite the wide array of predictors examined in the exchange rates research, no research of which we are aware has considered rural and urban differences in exchange rates. Thus, this area remains an important area of exploration as well.

*The Importance of Place for the Incarceration and Family Relationship*

An inmate's relationship with their family is an important determinant of their behavior while incarcerated and their success in the community upon release from prison. Nevertheless, no research of which we are aware examines the impact of having a child on an inmate's perceptions of the punitiveness of prison. Furthermore, the literature reviewed above reveals a dearth of research in the consideration of the impact of rurality in corrections. In this paper, we attempt to investigate this relationship by examining the impact of an inmate's parental status on their perception of the punitiveness of prison while incarcerated. Beyond exploring this topic, we attempt to understand how the contextual factors associated with these perceptions vary between rural and non-rural inmates. While several researchers have compared the substance abuse trajectories and trends among rural and non-rural inmates, to our knowledge there have not been any studies that focus on distinctions in parenting roles or practices for inmates who resided in rural or non-rural areas before their incarceration. We contend that the role of place is important when examining the consequences of incarceration. Given the variation within rural and non-rural places, we suspect that geography may influence how inmates view their responsibilities and roles as parents during their incarceration. We further suspect that inmates from rural areas may have different perceptions of the punitiveness of prison than their non-rural counterparts. This study is an attempt to examine those differences.

## METHODS

To collect the data used in this research, we gained permission from the Department of Corrections in a Midwestern state to visit six prisons and survey

groups of inmates at each of those prisons. The prisons were selected based on their likelihood of providing large enough proportions of Black and female inmates to allow us to make meaningful comparisons between racial and gender groups in terms of their perceptions of the punitiveness of prison. Because a key goal of the larger study from which these data were drawn was to examine inmates' perceptions of their own likelihood for success when they were released, we worked with the Department of Corrections to identify only those inmates in each institution that were within 12 months of their parole hearing or release date. Using these criteria, and after gaining approval from the university institutional review board and the Department of Corrections Research division, we visited five prisons that housed both minimum- and medium-security inmates throughout the state and the only public institution that housed females in the state. Using self-report surveys administered to groups of 50 to 100 inmates gathered in locations that were both able to insure privacy yet hold many inmates (e.g., cafeteria, chapel, visiting areas), we obtained data from a total of 1,234 inmates across those institutions. Further details about the data collection are available in other sources (May and Wood 2010).

#### *Survey Instrument*

The instrument used to collect the data was a 15-page questionnaire adapted from the one used by Wood, May, and their colleagues in several studies and is described in detail elsewhere (see May and Wood 2010 for a review of those studies). In this instrument, respondents were asked to provide data regarding demographic and contextual characteristics and their perceptions of the punitiveness of prison as compared to several alternative sanctions, county jail, and boot camp. We also collected background information on age, education, marital status, education level, what type of locale the inmates lived in when they were growing up, and several questions about whether they had children and, if they did, their relationship with those children.

The purpose of this research is threefold. First, we wanted to determine whether inmates that had children had different perceptions of prison than their colleagues that did not have children. Second, we wanted to understand how growing up in a rural area affected that relationship. We also wanted to determine whether these relationships were affected by known demographic predictors of perceptions of prison (e.g., gender, race, age, education, and income).

## INMATE PERCEPTIONS OF THE PUNITIVENESS OF PRISON 45

*Independent Variables*

Given that the primary purposes of this study were to both examine the impact of having children on an inmate's perceptions of punitiveness and to determine whether this impact varied among rural and non-rural inmates, we used two questions to obtain these data. The frequency distributions for these two questions are included in Table 1. First, we asked respondents if they had children. Three in four respondents (75.1 percent) had children. We also asked participants to self-report the approximate size of the population in the area where they grew up by asking "When you were growing up, what kind of place did you live in most of your life?" We recoded the variable so that those responding that they lived in either rural areas (%) or a "town under 10,000 people" (%) were coded as rural (1) and all other respondents were coded as non-rural (34.7 percent of the sample).<sup>1</sup>

*Control Variables*

As mentioned earlier, several researchers have found significant differences in inmates' perceptions of prison based on their gender, race, age, and other factors (see May and Wood 2010, for review). Thus, we also collected information from the inmates regarding their gender, race, age, and education level. Three in four respondents (75.9 percent) were male while more than one in four respondents (27.4 percent) were black.<sup>2</sup> Seven in ten inmates (70.7 percent) had an education level of high school graduate/G.E.D. recipient or above and about half the sample (49.8 percent) had received public assistance as a child. The mean age of the sample was 35.97 years.

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<sup>1</sup>We examined differences in exchange rates by three different configurations of rurality. We first compared only those respondents that were from rural areas with all other respondents, then compared respondents from rural areas, from towns less than 10,000 people, and small cities between 10,000 and 50,000 people with their counterparts. Because all configurations of rurality had the same substantive impact on exchange rates, we chose to use the configuration of inmates from rural areas and small towns, as that was the most intuitive representation of rurality.

<sup>2</sup>Because the vast majority of the inmates (95.2%) self-reported that they were either white or black, and black inmates are far more likely than white inmates to prefer prison to alternative sanctions in previous research, we coded black inmates as (1) and white inmates as (0) and coded the remaining 57 inmates as missing on the race variable.

TABLE 1. FREQUENCIES OF CHILDREN AND RURAL VARIABLES

	N	PERCENTAGE
Do you have children?		
Yes .....	921	75.1
No.....	306	24.9
When you were growing up, what kind of place did you live most of your life?		
Large city (250,000 or more) .....	331	27.0
Suburb of large city .....	59	4.8
Medium city (50,000 to 250,000).....	159	13.0
A small city (10,000 to 50,000).....	241	19.6
A town (under 10,000).....	243	19.8
A rural area.....	183	14.9
Missing .....	11	0.9

### *Dependent Variable*

The dependent variables for this study were the exchange rates from jail and four alternative sanctions that respondents were asked to estimate by providing the number of months they would serve on that sanction to avoid 12 months in a medium-security prisons. These sanctions were selected to represent inmates' perceptions of sanctions across a variety of sanctions. Thus, we selected two sanctions that are typically viewed as significantly more punitive than prison (county jail and correctional boot camp), two that are generally viewed as less punitive than prison (electronic monitoring and intermittent incarceration), and one that is widely viewed as the least punitive sanction that convicted adult offenders might experience (regular probation).

For each of the alternative sanctions listed in Table 2, respondents were given a brief description of the sanction and were then asked to "think about 12 months actual time in a medium security correctional center. What is the maximum number of months of (Insert alternative sanction here) you would take to avoid serving 12 months actual time in prison?" Respondents thus created exchange rates for each of the alternative sanctions. We have included the measure of intermittent incarceration in the Appendix B to both demonstrate how exchange rates were estimated and to provide readers unfamiliar with that sanction a background to understand the comparison.

The results presented in Table 2 indicate that inmates found boot camp and jail as the most onerous sanctions and were generally willing to serve about half as much boot camp (5.41 months) and jail (5.50 months) as prison (based on the 12

## INMATE PERCEPTIONS OF THE PUNITIVENESS OF PRISON 47

TABLE 2. TABLE OF AVERAGE EXCHANGE RATES FOR SANCTIONS UNDER STUDY.

EXCHANGE RATE	SAMPLE MEAN	NON- RURAL		NO CHILD	
		RURAL MEAN	RURAL MEAN	CHILD MEAN	CHILD MEAN
Boot Camp . . . . .	5.41	5.09	5.60	6.34*	5.12
Jail . . . . .	5.50	5.28	5.64	5.85	5.39
Intermittent Incarceration	14.34	16.51*	13.26	13.79	14.51
Electronic Monitoring . . . .	15.15	15.92	14.83	15.56	15.01
Regular Probation . . . . .	24.54	27.23*	23.10	24.04	24.70

NOTE: \*Difference Significant at  $p \leq .05$  (Independent Sample t-test; two-tailed)

months medium security incarceration under consideration). Inmates found regular probation least punitive (exchange rate of 24.54 months). The remaining sanctions were rated less punitive than prison; inmates were willing to serve 14.34 months of intermittent incarceration and 15.15 months of electronic monitoring to avoid a 12-month sanction in a medium security prison.

#### *Independent Variables*

Because we were primarily interested in how having a child affected an inmate's perceptions of the punitiveness of prison, and how those perceptions were influenced by whether the inmate grew up in a rural area or not, we estimated independent sample t-tests to determine if (1) inmates from rural areas were significantly different from their counterparts from non-rural areas in their exchange rates and (2) to determine if inmates with children were significantly different from their counterparts without children in their exchange rates. The results of those analyses are also presented in Table 2.

The results presented in Table 2 suggest that inmates raised in rural areas (hereafter called rural inmates) were willing to serve significantly more months on both intermittent incarceration (16.51 months v. 13.26 months;  $p \leq .05$ ) and regular probation (27.23 v. 23.10;  $p \leq .05$ ) than their counterparts that were not raised in rural areas (hereafter called non-rural inmates). Additionally, although the differences in exchange rates were not statistically significant, rural inmates were also willing to serve more months of electronic monitoring than their non-rural counterparts and fewer months of county jail and boot camp to avoid prison than their counterparts.

The independent sample t-test results presented in Table 2 also suggest that inmates without children were willing to serve significantly less time in boot camp

(6.34 months v. 5.12 months;  $p \leq .05$ ) to avoid 12 months in prison than their counterparts with children. None of the other exchange rates were significantly different, and no clear pattern emerged in those differences. Thus, it appears that having a child only really matters for boot camp, not for any of the other sanctions.

The independent sample *t*-test results presented in Table 2 suggest that having children had little impact on an inmate's perceived punitiveness of prison.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, we wanted to examine whether the impact of an inmate's parenting status (1) varied by whether or not they were a rural inmate and (2) whether traditional predictors of perceived punitiveness of prison varied by whether the inmate grew up in a rural area or not. To our knowledge, this is the first study that considered those predictors separately for rural and non-rural inmates. For brevity, abbreviated ordinary least squares multivariate linear regression models of those results are presented in Table 3.

The results presented in Table 3 reveal several interesting findings. First, and most important, after controlling for known predictors of exchange rates, whether or not an inmate had a child had no statistically significant impact on an exchange rates for any of the sanctions under consideration, and the nonsignificant impact remained for both rural and non-rural inmates. Thus, it appears that an inmate's parental status has no impact on their perception of the punitiveness of prison, whether they were raised in a rural area or not. We discuss the importance of these findings in the conclusion section of this paper.

A second interesting finding concerns how the explained variance in the exchange rates varies between rural and non-rural inmates. Although the explained variance in the models never rose above 10% for either rural or non-rural inmates, except for boot camp, the regression models for rural inmates explained far more variance for rural inmates than non-rural inmates. Thus, it appears that the important predictors of exchange rates are more important for rural inmates than non-rural inmates. Because this is the first research of which we are aware to make

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<sup>3</sup>In results not presented here, we examined several models where we measured the quality of the inmate's relationship with their child as well. We regressed the exchange rate variables on whether the inmate planned to live with their child upon release from prison, whether they were the custodial parent of their child before their incarceration, and whether the inmate was the primary caregiver for their child before incarceration. None of the variables had a statistically significant impact on any of the exchange rates under consideration so we decided to limit the models and discussion of the models to whether or not the inmate was a parent.

TABLE 3. RURAL AND NON-RURAL MULTIVARIATE LINEAR REGRESSION RESULTS OF REGRESSING EXCHANGE RATES ON HAVING CHILDREN AND CONTROL VARIABLES<sup>4</sup>

	BOOT CAMP		INTERMITTENT INCARCERATION		ELECTRONIC MONITORING		REGULAR PROBATION	
	Rural $\beta$	Non-rural $\beta$	Rural $\beta$	Non-rural $\beta$	Rural $\beta$	Non-rural $\beta$	Rural $\beta$	Non-rural $\beta$
Male inmates . . . . .	.04	.07	.015	.00	.03	.00	-.14*	-.04
Black inmates . . . . .	-.05	.08*	-.10	-.05	-.08	-.05	-.07	-.10*
Public assistance recipients	.05	.10*	.04	.02	.07	.08*	.05	.00
High school/GED inmates	.00	-.03	.00	.02	.08	.04	.05	.05
Older inmates . . . . .	-.08	-.10*	-.16*	-.07	-.19*	-.05	-.21*	-.08
Have children . . . . .	-.09	-.07	.08	.00	.09	-.91	.01	.01
R <sup>2</sup> . . . . .	.03	.04	.04	.01	.06	.01	.08	.02
F . . . . .	1.57	4.89	2.59	0.85	3.87	1.57	5.33	2.05

NOTE: \*p&lt;.05.

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<sup>4</sup>We also estimated regression models to examine rural/non-rural differences in predictors of county jail exchange rates. Because the F statistic for neither model was statistically significant, and because there were no significant predictors of county jail exchange rates for either rural or non-rural inmates, we did not include that regression model in Table 2. All full regression models are available from the authors upon request.

this comparison, this finding has implications for future research and should be further explored.

A third interesting finding from this research concerns the impact of age. For nonrural inmates (but not rural inmates), older inmates were willing to serve significantly fewer months on boot camp than their younger counterparts ( $\beta = -.10$ ;  $p \leq .05$ ). For rural inmates (but not non-rural inmates), older inmates were willing to serve significantly fewer months on intermittent incarceration ( $\beta = -.16$ ;  $p \leq .05$ ), electronic monitoring ( $\beta = -.19$ ;  $p \leq .05$ ), and regular probation ( $\beta = -.21$ ;  $p \leq .05$ ) to avoid prison than their younger counterparts.

Finally, the impact of several other known predictors of exchange rates varied by the rurality of where the inmate spent their childhood as well. In short, race mattered for non-rural inmates but not rural inmates in their perceptions of the punitiveness of boot camp and regular probation. For non-rural inmates but not rural inmates, Blacks were willing to serve significantly more months of boot camp ( $\beta = .08$ ;  $p \leq .05$ ) and significantly fewer months of regular probation ( $\beta = -.10$ ;  $p \leq .05$ ) to avoid prison than white inmates. Additionally, for non-rural inmates, those that received public assistance were willing to serve significantly more months on electronic monitoring than their counterparts that did not ( $\beta = .08$ ;  $p \leq .05$ ). Finally, for rural inmates, males were willing to serve significantly fewer months of regular probation to avoid prison than females ( $\beta = -.14$ ;  $p \leq .05$ ). An inmate's education level did not have a statistically significant impact on any of the exchange rates for either rural or non-rural inmates.

## DISCUSSION

In this study, we sought to examine the impact of having a child on a prisoner's perceptions of the punitiveness of prison. Additionally, we sought to determine whether this relationship varied between rural and non-rural inmates, and also sought to determine whether known predictors of perceptions of the punitiveness of prison differed between rural and non-rural inmates.

### *The Impact of Children on an Inmate's Perceived Punitiveness of Prison*

The first, and perhaps most important finding from this research, is that whether or not an inmate had a child had no impact on their perception of the punitiveness of prison for either rural or non-rural inmates after controlling for known predictors of exchange rates. Although no research of which we are aware has examined this relationship, we were surprised by this finding. Based on the

## INMATE PERCEPTIONS OF THE PUNITIVENESS OF PRISON 51

well-known and widely researched deprivation model, we suspected that one of the “pains of imprisonment” experienced by inmates (Sykes 1958) would be separation from their children. In fact, Easterling (2012) reviews several studies that suggest the following pains of imprisonment, particularly for incarcerated mothers: (1) feelings of loneliness and confusion, particularly in the early stages of incarceration; (2) deprivation of mother-child contact; and (3) feelings of helplessness, guilt, anger, and other negative emotions.

The models included herein find no such relationship; in fact, in models not included here, we operationalized the parenting experience of inmates in a variety of ways, including (1) operationalizing parents as those that had custody of their children immediately before incarceration, (2) operationalizing parents as those inmates that expected to live with their children upon release, and (3) operationalizing parents as those who felt they had a significant impact on their children’s lives before incarceration. Changing the operationalization of this variable did not affect an inmate’s exchange rate. Thus, while there are many pains of imprisonment that may increase the punitiveness of prison, separation from children, at least in this sample, is apparently not one of those pains.

Several explanations for this nonsignificant finding are plausible. First, incarcerated parents may engage in compartmentalization to make the separation from their children bearable. Parents may realize that thoughts and memories of their children, and the time they are missing with those children while incarcerated, will make their prison experience more painful. Consequently, this realization may cause them to attempt to keep the prison life they are currently experiencing separate from their pre-prison life where they were a father or mother to a child that they realize they will sorely miss. Thus, when asked about their perceptions of prison as punishment, they do not consider the disrupted relationship they have with their children in the formula whereby they estimate how prison compares with alternative sanctions.

A second explanation was provided by corrections professionals to one author at an invited presentation where the author presented findings about the punitiveness of prison. These professionals were not surprised by the finding that having children did not influence an inmate’s perception of the punitiveness of prison. They suggested that the reason many of these inmates were in prison was because they had selfishly decided to engage in criminal behavior that caused them to be arrested and subsequently incarcerated. Thus, their selfishness prevented them from considering the impact their absence was having on their children (and

vice versa) and their prison experience was only minimally affected by their separation from their child whose relationship they did not value anyway.

Both explanations are merely conjecture; an empirical explanation for this unexpected finding is largely beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, it is essential that other researchers further explore this finding, perhaps by using qualitative interviews with both well-adjusted and poorly adjusted inmate parents, to attempt to understand what many would consider to be a counterintuitive finding.

#### *Rural Inmates Are Willing to Serve More Time in the Community to Avoid Prison*

Another interesting finding concerns the differences in exchange rates between rural and non-rural inmates. In bivariate models, rural inmates would serve significantly more time on probation and intermittent incarceration than their non-rural counterparts; they were also willing to serve more time on electronic monitoring than non-rural inmates (although the differences for electronic monitoring were not statistically significant). This is the first research of which we are aware that examines rural/non-rural differences in perceptions of the punitiveness of prison and thus we feel this finding is an important beginning to an area of future research study.

There are several reasons why rural inmates would be willing to serve more time in the community to avoid prison than their non-rural counterparts. These explanations revolve around differences in proximity, community networking ties, and space between rural and urban inmates. Each of these reasons are discussed in detail below.

First, and perhaps most important, given the proximity of urban residents to one another, it is likely that inmates raised in non-rural areas grew up with personal knowledge of someone (or even several people) from their local area incarcerated. They may have discussed the incarceration experience with them and thus prison might not be as “shocking” for them when they were sentenced to prison themselves. Inmates that grew up in urban areas may also have a greater likelihood of having acquaintances that were in the same facility to which they were sentenced, and thus could help them transition quickly into the informal networks that are present in prison. Consequently, the prison experience may not be viewed as punitively for non-rural inmates as it would be for inmates raised in rural areas without those same connections.

## INMATE PERCEPTIONS OF THE PUNITIVENESS OF PRISON 53

A second explanation might concern the homes to which prisoners return upon release. Some evidence suggests that rural inmates may face greater challenges in reentry than their non-rural counterparts because of the paucity of programming, housing, and employment available in rural areas (see Wodhal 2006). Nevertheless, even those researchers that make that claim admit little is known about reentry for rural prisoners. Thus, rural inmates may be more willing to face the challenges of community corrections than their non-rural counterparts because they believe (whether rightly or wrongly) that their networks of family and friends will provide them both housing and employment upon release. This confidence may make them more willing to serve time in the community than in prison.

A final explanation is one that, to our knowledge, has never been explored in correctional research. Children growing up in urban areas have many amenities available to them that children raised in rural areas do not (e.g., parks, skating rinks, bowling alleys, malls) but children growing up in rural areas may have something as important: space to roam. A child raised in a rural area often has fields, pastures, woods, or big lots on which to play; children growing up in urban areas (particularly large, metropolitan areas) do not have that same luxury. Thus, one pain of imprisonment that may be particularly punitive for rural prisoners is the lack of space (or even view of the outdoors) that often exists in prisons and the sense of freedom that is available for individuals that roam freely in those spaces. While this suggestion is not testable in this research, the fact that rural inmates were also less willing than non-rural inmates to serve boot camp or jail in lieu of prison offers limited evidence that availability of personal space (which is less available in jail than prison) and freedom to move in that space (more restricted in boot camp than prison) may be an important consideration for rural prisoners when considering the punitiveness of prison. Although the rural offender might still have limited privacy if they chose a sanction such as electronic monitoring, regular probation and intermittent incarceration, they still have more freedom of movement and personal space than they would have had they remained in prison.

In sum, it appears that rural prisoners may find prison more punitive than non-rural prisoners. Although we have offered several reasons for that finding, at this point, all we have to offer is conjecture. Future research should consider rural/urban differences with both qualitative and quantitative research to gain a better understanding of these differences.

The final important finding from this research concerns the impact of age on exchange rates and how that association varies between rural and non-rural

inmates. Among rural inmates (but not non-rural inmates), older inmates would serve significantly fewer months on all three community sanctions (intermittent sanctions, electronic monitoring, or regular probation) than their younger counterparts.<sup>5</sup> The finding that older inmates are willing to serve fewer months on alternative sanctions to avoid prison than younger inmates is not novel; in fact, this association has been found in a variety of studies (see May and Wood 2010, for review). Nevertheless, because no other research of which we are aware has contrasted rural and non-rural prisoners as we did in this study, we are not certain why this finding applies to rural inmates but not non-rural inmates.

One explanation might be the health concerns of older inmates. Older inmates generally are in poorer health than their younger counterparts. They typically have one or more chronic conditions or disability and report declines in health since incarceration (Nowotny et al. 2015). Because medical treatment (particularly free medical treatment often required for elderly ex-convicts) is more readily available in prison than in rural areas, it may be that older inmates would rather serve the remainder of their sentence in prison as a way to maintain access to their healthcare. Greater availability of health care in urban areas may obviate this concern among older inmates from urban areas. More research is needed in this area to explore this finding.

### *Limitations*

Although we believe that the results presented in this study have made several important contributions to the literature, these results are limited by several factors. The primary limitation concerns the operationalization of a “rural inmate.” Because the question used to assess rurality asked the inmate about the population of the area where they spent most their childhood, it does not capture the population where they were living immediately before their incarceration. Future research should use both a measure of the population of the area where the inmate grew up and a measure of the population of where the inmate was living immediately before incarceration to fully understand the impact of rurality on the prison experience. A second limitation concerns the operationalization of “inmates

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<sup>5</sup>Besides the findings about significant age differences in exchange rates for the community sanctions among rural but not non-rural inmates, older, non-rural inmates were significantly less likely to serve boot camp than their younger, non-rural counterparts. Given that the relationship was similar for rural inmates (but not statistically significant), we chose to focus the discussion on differences in preferences for community sanctions rather than boot camp.

## INMATE PERCEPTIONS OF THE PUNITIVENESS OF PRISON 55

with children.” Although we examined models that operationalized an inmate parent in a variety of ways, none of them had a significant impact on exchange rates for either rural or non-rural inmates. Nevertheless, we did not include a measure of the inmate’s attachment to their children at the time of the questionnaire. We believe this may be a particularly important factor in the parent/child relationship; consequently, future research should include some measure of that parent/child attachment as well. A final limitation concerns the low explained variance in all the models under consideration. Obviously, several factors that explain inmates’ perceptions of the severity of prison were not included in the models, as more than 90% of the variance for all models was left unexplained. Future research should continue to examine factors that might be predictive of inmates’ perceptions of the punitiveness of prison to continue to advance the exchange rates literature.

## CONCLUSION

We began this effort as an attempt to expand the literature on both the impact of having children on an inmate’s perceptions of the punitiveness of prison and rural/non-rural differences in those perceptions. Although we feel this research has made important contributions, as with many studies, we are left with more research questions than answers. Future research should use this study as a foundation to build an important research agenda on both the differences in rural and non-rural inmates and the impact of children on an inmate’s prison experience. As with many other aspects of research in prison, although the answers to these questions may take many years to uncover, the difficulty of conducting the research does not make the questions any less important.

## APPENDIX A. EXTANT SCHOLARLY RESEARCH ON RURAL/NON-RURAL DIFFERENCES IN INCARCERATION.

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RESEARCH ON SITING OF PRISONS IN RURAL AREAS

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## INMATE PERCEPTIONS OF THE PUNITIVENESS OF PRISON 57

## RESEARCH ON PRISON REENTRY IN RURAL AREAS

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## APPENDIX B. INTERMITTENT INCARCERATION.

With this punishment, you must spend weekends or evenings in the county jail, which typically is much more unpleasant than prison. Still, since you are not in prison, you can have a job and be involved with your family and community when you are not spending time in jail. However, failure to report to jail, or failure to pass a random urinalysis test can result in you returning to prison.

Think about 12 months actual time in a medium security correctional center. What is the maximum number of months of intermittent incarceration you would take to avoid serving 12 months actual time in prison?

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