

SESSION 1201: Demography of Crime and Punishment

TITLE: Beyond Race and SES: Understanding the factors that predict arrests and convictions

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Short Abstract (150 words)

Criminologists know that convictions and sentences are inextricably linked to the race and socio-economic status of the accused, such that two individuals of different races who commit the same crime are unlikely to face the same probability of conviction. However, we believe that there is more to be learned about the factors beyond race and poverty that lead to conviction. Taking advantage of a unique opportunity afforded by a highly homogenous sample, we propose to expand on criminological research by examining variations in arrest and conviction by a series of “secondary” characteristics. Using the Illinois Family Study dataset, a longitudinal survey of a representative sample of welfare recipients in Illinois and complemented by full arrest and conviction records, we will attempt to discern the factors outside of race, gender and income that affect whether or not women are arrested, and beyond that, what factors result in conviction.

Extended Abstract (2-4 pages, including tables) or paper

There is a large body of criminological literature that demonstrates that criminal convictions and sentences are inextricably linked to the race and socio-economic status of the accused, such that two individuals of different races who are believed to have committed the same crime are unlikely to face the same probability of conviction. In part because of this, much criminological research focuses on arrest data instead of convictions.

However, we believe that there is more to be learned about the factors beyond race and poverty that lead to conviction. There are numerous additional correlates of criminal behavior found in studies of incarcerated populations, such as domestic violence, substance abuse and mental illness. The question we ask is whether these factors are like race and poverty in that they disproportionately affect the likelihood of conviction, or whether they are factors that actually promote criminal behavior.

Further, we have access to data about a wealth of additional factors that we feel may also affect criminological outcomes in a sample of poor women. Therefore, we will also explore

whether women's education level, reliance on welfare, employment history and family support affect their outcomes within the criminal justice system. In order to examine the role of these "secondary" characteristics in determining outcomes, we will assess their impacts on both arrest and conviction.

That is, because conviction is believed to be unduly influenced by the race and SES of the accused, we posit that other factors, such as substance abuse, may also influence conviction rates, although their effects are masked by race and SES effects in most studies. To test this, we will analyze within group variation, using a racially and economically homogenous sample of arrested individuals and modeling the impact of secondary demographic characteristics on probability of incarceration. We will also pursue similar analyses predicting arrests within a larger sample of poor women.

For this analysis, we will use the Illinois Family Study (IFS) data, a longitudinal dataset following a representative sample of individuals who were receiving welfare in Illinois in 1998. The IFS dataset includes annual surveys with these individuals starting in the fall of 1999 and going through 2003, as well as continuous records of cash welfare, Medicaid, and food stamp receipt, income, and criminal records provided by the state of Illinois. The IFS sample was randomly selected from all individuals who were the primary recipient on a Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) grant in nine stratified counties in Illinois in the fall of 1998. Welfare recipients in these counties make up roughly 75% of the entire caseload for the state of Illinois, and with a 72% response rate at baseline, the study began with a sample of nearly 1,400 individuals. The baseline sample is 97% female, 80% black, 32 years old on average, and 59% of them have completed high school or gotten a GED.

Thus, although the IFS consists of a representative sample, it is a representative sample of current and former welfare recipients, and so the sample is almost entirely female, uniformly poor and almost exclusively non-white. While the demographic homogeneity of the sample makes most non-welfare based analyses inappropriate, we believe that it is an asset in the exploration of the factors that predict arrest and conviction. Because the IFS sample is large, consists primarily of the demographic populations known to be over-represented in our criminal justice system, and the dataset includes a wealth of survey information on the secondary characteristics that may or may not be associated with criminological outcomes, using the IFS dataset to explore the predictors of arrest and conviction provides a unique opportunity. This

data will allow us to better understand the factors beyond race and socio-economic status that put women under the supervision of the criminal justice system.

The Illinois Family Study dataset includes four waves of respondent surveys, which cover a wide range of topics from physical and substance abuse to employment to demographic information. Using this data, we will employ more than a decade of criminal records, as well as demographic and personal information provided by the women themselves, to match women's life circumstances to their comparative odds of arrest and conviction. In doing this, we hope to provide additional insight into the factors that predict women's entry into criminal justice system.