Compounding Inequality:
Criminal Sanctions and Racial Gaps in Educational Attainment

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Incarceration has become an increasingly important factor in the lives of low-skill, particularly African American, men such that the rates of incarceration for Latino and black men 2.5 to 6 times that of white men, respectively. The growing size and racially imbalanced structure of the mass incarceration system warrants an examination of whether and how this institution impacts educational attainment generally and with respect to racial gaps. This dissertation first estimates whether and how incarceration can influence racial gaps in both direct and indirect ways and testing alternative strategies to criminal sanctions that could alter the effects of incarceration.

The first essay begins by estimating the effect of incarceration on educational attainment. I find that incarceration does directly reduce the probability of attaining most educational milestones such as high school degree or college degree receipt; however, I find no direct effect and modest indirect effects of incarceration on racial gaps in educational attainment. The second essay supposes that less punitive policies could serve to reduce the negative effects of incarceration. If moderate or minor sanctioning strategies led to better educational outcomes, then greater use of these alternatives could reduce racial gaps in educational attainment, at least indirectly. However, I find little evidence that alternative sentencing strategies differ from
incarceration in the effects on educational attainment. Thus, these alternatives do not appear to impact racial gaps in educational attainment. In the third essay, I show how and to what extent survey data that excludes prisoners (as is common practice for a large proportion of survey data) leads to biased estimates of racial gaps in educational attainment as well as bias in gender gaps for African Americans. As a whole, this dissertation demonstrates how the criminal justice system reduces educational opportunities, and because of the racial disparities in incarceration, this effect will be incurred by a greater proportion of black and Latino men than others.