LOCAL INCARCERATION AS SOCIAL CONTROL: A NATIONAL ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, AND POLITICAL DETERMINANTS OF JAIL USE IN THE UNITED STATES

by

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ABSTRACT

Previous research indicates that community context impacts social control. Several scholars have identified social, economic and political factors to be important predictors of police force size, arrests rates and incarceration rates. Few studies, however, have examined jail use as an indicator of formal social control. Millions of individuals pass through jails every year, and these local facilities are at the center of the criminal justice system, reflecting mobilization of social control by law enforcement, courts and corrections.

Drawing from a social threat perspective and political framework, this study seeks to understand how community context affects local incarceration. Specifically, this study examines to what extent jail use is influenced by racial and ethnic heterogeneity, economic inequality, and political conservatism using a nationally representative sample of U.S. jails. The main dataset for this study was developed from the Bureau of Justice Statistics’s 2013 Census of Jails. Using the Law Enforcement Crosswalk File and government identifiers, the Census of Jails was merged with other secondary datasets to investigate county-level variation in local incarceration.

This study finds that community context impacts jail use. It is found that county-level black presence and Hispanic presence differentially impact jail use. Specifically,
racial threat has a U-shaped curvilinear relationship with local incarceration, and ethnic threat has an inverted U-shaped curvilinear relationship with jail use. The economic characteristics of counties also differentially impact jail use. Income inequality is negatively related to jail use, and both the unemployment rate and poverty rate are positively associated with jail use. Political conservatism among county residents is also associated with higher rates of jail use. This study reveals the importance of examining the impact of minority threat by assessing the racial make-up of local areas separately from ethnic composition. Additionally, the importance of testing for nonlinear effects is revealed. Further, inclusion of counties’ economic conditions and political ideology are critical in more fully accounting for how variations in the local community impact jail use.