

Vincenzo Scalia

**Sara Wakefield and Christopher Wildeman, "Children of the Prison Boom. Mass Incarceration and the Future of American Inequality". New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, 248 pp.**

(doi: 10.2383/80405)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 1, gennaio-aprile 2015

**Ente di afferenza:**

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

**Licenza d'uso**

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

## Book Review

**Sara Wakefield and Christopher Wildeman, *Children of the Prison Boom. Mass Incarceration and the Future of American Inequality*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, 248 pp.**

doi: 10.2383/80405

Since 1980s, the United States of America have set the western standard in the domain of penal policies. The number of inmates has grown from 100,000 in 1980 to more than 4,000,000 in 2010, a figure based on both the Federal and the State prisons. Many prominent scholars have discussed about the nature of what is objectively a mass imprisonment, Jonathan Simon and David Garland have stressed the relationship between the growths of imprisonment rate on the one hand, and the feelings of insecurity and moral panic affecting post-industrial Western Society. The so-called zero tolerance policies, resulting into the criminalization of many deviant behaviours, and in the introduction of three strikes and you are out measures, which end up in longer sentences, are grass rooted, according to these authors, in the feeling of insecurity of contemporary American society. Loic Wacquant makes a different point, as he analyses the meaningful shifts affecting public expenditure policies enforced by the American administration since Ronald Reagan boosted neo-liberalism. His conclusion is that penal state has replaced welfare state, as well that similar trends have occurred also across the ocean.

Because of the swift and abrupt soaring of imprisonment rates, very few studies have focused their attention on the effects of mass incarceration in late thirty years. Despite the fact that social disruption, deprivation, community crackups and other aspects related to mass incarceration could be provide sociological studies with a very fertile ground, studies have been mainly based on the judicial and penal system, as well as on the governmental policies which lag behind such an important aspect of society.

Sara Wakefield and Christopher Wildeman try to fill a vacuum in this respect, as their book chooses to turn aside all the macro aspects of penalty to concentrate the efforts on a specific aspect, that is, how mass incarceration affects the lives of children whose fathers are in jail. It is not a sexist choice, both because imprisonment concerns males in the 90% of cases and because, working class and underclass contexts, which inmates mostly belong to, still relies on the central role played by male bread winners. Moreover, racial inequality is another important part of the studies, as African Americans account for more than the half of prison population in the USA. Wakefield and Wildeman engage in a qualitative and quantitative work to test the hypothesis that children whose fathers are imprisoned are likely to have more chances to become marginal, and maybe to develop a deviant culture, than white and middle-class children. Through an accurate use and discussion of figures, they show how inequality runs through different aspects. The authors begin by explaining in the first chapter the reasons why prison boom is a cause of social inequality, then move to illustrate, in chapter two, how the chances to have a jailed father are, for an African American child, twenty-nine times as great than white siblings. This aspect is not only a matter of proportion we are dealing with, as its backlashes result in the unequal patterns of education. Children of jailed fathers have a higher rate of educational dropout than those juveniles who grow up

in families who are not within the penal domain. The reason for that, as the following chapter explains, lies in the deprived and deviant background children grew up before the incarceration of their fathers. The lack of paternal support will force mothers into deviant behaviors, either for matters of survival, or as an effect of social marginalization. Chapters 4, 5, 6, focus on the analysis of psychological and behavioral consequences of fathers' imprisonment, emphasizing how the final effect is that of reproducing the conditions of marginality, deviance and crime among the newer generations of African American children. Chapter 7 shows the outcomes of inequalities: African American children of jailed fathers are twice as likely to suffer from social problems: mental health problems, mortality rate and homelessness. In the final chapter, Wakefield and Wildeman make a cautious stance towards policy proposals, although they make clear that their main purpose is not that of giving solutions, but rather to widen the scientific literature about this topic and to raise the interest and the scientific discussion about it.

Mass imprisonment, in other words, is the final point of the vicious circle of inequality, because marginal groups are more likely to become the target of the penal system and to suffer harsh punishment. Their effects reflect on community, as they engender new inequalities, embitter marginality, and produce new deviant group to treat through the penal system. The solution, the authors argue, consists of the implementation of new welfare state policies, based on housing, education, drug treatment, economic support to disadvantaged families, psychological support. The need for massive public policies of social inclusion is a point it is impossible not to agree with, but it is too vague, as those interventions recently enforced as the welfare to work programs are to some extent inclusive policies. This is a flaw of the book, to the extent that the authors insist on the disruptive effects of mass imprisonment and do not focus on the changes it brings about. We refer to the possible strategies of resistance that the population of the ghettos work out to survive growing marginalization. How do they cope with it? Are there new solidarity networks, which marginal communities create and reinforce to protect, to a certain extent, children of inmates from going astray? It would have been interesting to answer such questions, for two reasons: first, they could help governmental agencies to shape new inclusive policies that bring about the benefit of empowering local communities by their direct involvement. Many social workers reports and scientific works have demonstrated how marginal groups perceive a welfare system from above as an instrument of social control and refuse to cope with it, thus embittering their conditions of marginality. Moreover, a welfare state system shaped on the needs and culture of marginal communities could be helpful on the quantitative side of the welfare system. The valorization of family and friendship ties can help saving money in times of recession and slow economic growth.

*Vincenzo Scalia*  
University of Winchester