

The Overlooked Effects of Mass Incarceration, Data Constraints, and Legal Status on Immigrant and Inmate Health

Research on immigrant health is hindered by its scarce attention to two structural factors that affect health: incarceration and legal status. Yet these two systems of stratification, which impact civic integration and socioeconomic status, have enormous potential to shape immigrant health. In order to address these gaps in the literature, my first empirical chapter evaluates the immigrant health advantage when a population historically excluded from nationally representative datasets—the incarcerated—are included in analyses. I find that evidence of an immigrant health advantage is generally weaker among incarcerated individuals than among the general population. In the second empirical chapter, I examine legal status as a multidimensional and dynamic characteristic that shapes immigrant health over the life course. Results indicate that some groups, including immigrants who obtained citizenship and permanent residency through employment criteria, improved their relative health over time, while others, including immigrants with previous legalization or refugee experience, exhibited continual disadvantage. In the final section, I assess how visa category and gender alter the mental health trajectories of immigrants. Findings show that refugee women exhibit the greatest risk of mental illness over the life course, when compared to their non-refugee immigrant and male refugee counterparts. Overall, this research demonstrates that the current sociolegal landscape of mass incarceration coupled with the racialization and criminalization of immigrants may be generating unique health challenges for individuals caught in these systems of stratification.