

Northward Migration and the Rise of Racial Disparity in American Incarceration, 1880–1950¹

Christopher Muller
Harvard University

Of all facets of American racial inequality studied by social scientists, racial disparity in incarceration has proved one of the most difficult to explain. This article traces a portion of the rise of racial inequality in incarceration in northern and southern states to increasing rates of African-American migration to the North between 1880 and 1950. It employs three analytical strategies. First, it introduces a decomposition to assess the relative contributions of geographic shifts in the population and regional changes in the incarceration rate to the increase in racial disparity. Second, it estimates the effect of the rate of white and nonwhite migration on the change in the white and nonwhite incarceration rates of the North. Finally, it uses macro- and microdata to evaluate the mechanisms proposed to explain this effect.

INTRODUCTION

Two noteworthy features distinguish the practice of incarceration in America. The first is its sheer scale. Today the United States incarcerates its residents at a historically and comparatively unprecedented rate. After 100 years of relative stability, between 1970 and 2000 the American in-

¹ Funding for this research was provided by the National Science Foundation. For excellent comments I thank Jason Beckfield, Bernard Harcourt, Aziz Huq, Stanley Lieberman, Lindsey Macmillan, Suresh Naidu, Andrew Papachristos, Orlando Patter-