

# Mass Incarceration and (Mass) Probation: A Policy Feedback Example or Different Strategies of State Control?

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## ABSTRACT

Scholars of the U.S. penal have had much to say about signs of increasing punitiveness in the past three decades and most of this attention has been focused on increases in incarceration. However, increases in community supervision, namely probation programs, have been even larger in terms of absolute growth and the population under probation supervision is still nearly 3 times as large as the incarcerated population. Yet we know little about this form of criminal justice supervision and its relationship to mass incarceration. While probation is often conceptualized as an “alternative” to incarceration, many sociologists have argued that increasing probation paradoxically leads to increased imprisonment. This paper analyzes state-level probation and incarceration rates between 1977 and 2007 to explore the state-level determinants of probation rates and to evaluate the potential causal relationships that bind the two forms of supervision. The results suggest that probation rates have a small, but positive effect on incarceration rates. However, the results also reveal that there is tremendous variability in terms of states’ penal strategies. Furthermore, the economic and social determinants of probation are quite distinct from those of incarceration, suggesting a need for more research on the causes of the build-up in probation sentences.

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