Exploratory Analysis of Family Engagement: Challenges of the Incarcerated Mother-Children Relationship Post-Incarceration

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Abstract
The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the challenges faced by formerly incarcerated mothers taking over as primary caregivers post-incarceration and their experiences with parenting programs during their imprisonment. The population of female prisoners is the fastest growing population in the United States. Eighty percent of incarcerated women are mothers with children 18 and under. This research project sought to address the social and personal circumstances that ex-offending mothers experience during and post-incarceration and their ability to adapt and rebuild relationships with their families. The study population consisted of formerly incarcerated mothers, between the ages of 38 to 57, who served a minimum of 5 years in prison and had at least one child during their incarceration. Using data from face-to-face interviews with four formerly incarcerated mothers, six themes emerged. The themes were survival, emotional and support services, self-improvement, trauma, safety and well-being of children, and motherhood. The answers to the research questions concluded that for these participants visitation was the key contributing factor to their ability to parent while incarcerated and transition into caregiver post-release. Findings suggest the need for the development of parenting programs and additional support services for incarcerated mothers and their families to assist in the reunification process in order to keep families together. Despite limited access to parenting programs, participants expressed their desire to have had these services while incarcerated and strongly encourage the development of such programs to assist incarcerated mothers and their family maintain family ties and stay connected.

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Exploratory Analysis of Family Engagement: Challenges of the Incarcerated Mother-Children Relationship Post-Incarceration

By

Jimmell Gorley

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by
Dr. Janice Kelly, Ed.D.

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Dedication

I would first like to thank God. You have provided for me and been good to me even when I was not good to you or good to myself. You mean everything to me, and I am eternally grateful to be accepted as your own. Thank you!

I would like to thank my participants for their honesty and their willingness to help other incarcerated mothers and their families by telling your stories and being transparent. It is my belief that the testimonies that you have offered will encourage individual change and policy reform.

I would like to send a special thanks to Dr. Janice Kelly and Dr. Frances Wills. You two ladies have supported me throughout this journey and for that I thank you. You encouraged me when life got hard and rough and pushed to me from candidate to Dr. I couldn't have asked for a better committee. Thank you!

I would like to acknowledge my Cohort 10 family, especially my TRIADS. This has been a long journey, but I could not have made it without you. Individually and collectively, you have all poured into me in some way, shape, or form and for that I thank you. P-Diddy and Deacon Rhabb your friendship and support has been invaluable. (Trust the process - LOL) Thank you!

To my Union Baptist Church Family and Mass Choir, words cannot express the love that I have for you. Your prayers, support, and words of encouragement have fueled me during this process, especially in times when I felt like giving up or like I was inadequate. Rev. Cynthia Dorsey and Rev. Dr. Rosunde Nichols, the two of you are truly
angels sent from God. What you have done for me in the last few years has been extraordinary. I count it a privilege to be able to call you my mentors.

To my Mom: I couldn't ask for a better friend, confidant, and supporter. I couldn't have made it this far without you. You are a shining example of God's love for his children. I couldn't ask for a better mother. I cannot put into words what you mean to me. I thank God for you on a daily basis because I am so blessed to be able to share this life with you.

To Aunt Patti: You make me better. You make me smarter. You make me try harder. You encourage me. You make me laugh. You make me feel appreciated. You make me feel loved. Thank you for loving me always.

To Michael: You are my friend and my smile. God placed you in my life to love and to be loved and I am grateful. You have supported me throughout this journey and reminded me that I am strong, capable, and that I am never alone. You have truly inspired me when times were rough and stood by me when I wanted to give up. You are amazing and I look forward to what the future has in store for us.

To all of my family and friends who have walked this road with me, I would like to thank you for your support, your prayers, your words of encouragement, and for loving me as I worked to achieve this goal. This has been a long journey and I thank you for your presence.

Dear Dad: I never would have imagined that God would have taken you from me so soon. All I ever wanted to do is make you proud. I thank God that I had the opportunity to spend time and space with such a wonderful person and amazing father. You have poured into me in the most spectacular ways. I will carry you with me forever.
Until we meet again, I love you from the bottom of my heart. I dedicate this work to you, Allen Frank Gorley.
Biographical Sketch

Jimmell A. Gorley currently serves as the Director of Workers' Compensation for a New York State insurance company. Mr. Gorley is a Westchester County, NY resident who attended the College of Westchester where he earned his Bachelor’s degree in Business Management. He received his Master of Science degree in Guidance and Counseling from the College of New Rochelle in 2015.


Mr. Gorley is currently a member of the NAACP, the National Association of Blacks in Criminal Justice, and the American Correctional Association.
Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the challenges faced by formerly incarcerated mothers taking over as primary caregivers post-incarceration and their experiences with parenting programs during their imprisonment. The population of female prisoners is the fastest growing population in the United States. Eighty percent of incarcerated women are mothers with children 18 and under. This research project sought to address the social and personal circumstances that ex-offending mothers experience during and post-incarceration and their ability to adapt and rebuild relationships with their families.

The study population consisted of formerly incarcerated mothers, between the ages of 38 to 57, who served a minimum of 5 years in prison and had at least one child during their incarceration. Using data from face-to-face interviews with four formerly incarcerated mothers, six themes emerged. The themes were survival, emotional and support services, self-improvement, trauma, safety and well-being of children, and motherhood.

The answers to the research questions concluded that for these participants visitation was the key contributing factor to their ability to parent while incarcerated and transition into caregiver post-release. Findings suggest the need for the development of parenting programs and additional support services for incarcerated mothers and their families to assist in the reunification process in order to keep families together. Despite limited access to parenting programs, participants expressed their desire to have had these
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table of Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dedication .......................................................................................................................... iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biographical Sketch ........................................................................................................... vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract ............................................................................................................................. vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents ............................................................................................................... ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables .................................................................................................................... xii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Introduction ....................................................................................................... 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of Female Imprisonment .................................................................................... 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separation ....................................................................................................................... 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of Incarceration ................................................................................................... 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visitation/Phone Calls .................................................................................................... 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expenses ......................................................................................................................... 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Reunification ...................................................................................................... 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Statement .......................................................................................................... 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Rationale ...................................................................................................... 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of Purpose ....................................................................................................... 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions ........................................................................................................ 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Study .............................................................................................. 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitions of Terms ....................................................................................................... 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Summary ............................................................................................................. 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Review of the Literature ............................................................................... 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1: Introduction

The Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS, 2020) has reported that nearly 105,000 children have mothers who are or have been incarcerated in New York State (NYS). The need to provide mothers with transitional programs to prepare them for reentry and motherhood post-incarceration has been identified (OCFS, 2020). One reason for the high number of children with incarcerated mothers is the changes in drug laws over the last 10 years, which come with harsher sentences than previously given for drug-related offenses (Drug Policy Alliance, 2008).

Unfortunately, although revising the drug laws has aided in addressing the drug crisis, it has also caused separation between families and communities. Research shows that before incarceration, mothers were more apt than fathers to reside with their children, to be the primary caregivers, and to serve as the head of a single-parent household (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010). A mother's involvement in the criminal justice system has significant implications for the well-being of children, family, and the community where the mother lives (The Scottish Centre for Crime & Justice Research, 2015).

Further, the Bureau of Justice Statistics (2017) stated that the population of incarcerated mothers has increased by 800% since 1900. This increase in family separation makes it imperative to explore ways for mothers to transition into the primary caregivers for their children post-incarceration. Some groups have advocated for reentry programs that will assist incarcerated mothers in improving parenting skills and reunification post-release (New York Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents...
The following organizations in New York have identified alternatives to addressing some of the needs of this population, providing services that include support groups and educational and vocational programs, while fostering relationships between parents and children.

- Children of Promise
- Family Connections of Nyack
- Osbourne Association
- Prison Families of New York
- Fortune Society
- Edwin Gould Services
- Project Greenhope
- Women's Prison Association Hour Children - Bedford Hills and Taconic Correctional Women's Program

Other states such as Pennsylvania, Virginia, Indiana, California, and Nebraska provide similar services to incarcerated mothers and their families. However, one of the best known programs for incarcerated mothers and their children is the Hour Children program at Bedford Hills and Taconic Correctional Facilities, located in Bedford Hills, NY. The Hour Children program works within the NYS prisons, fostering family connections to maximize the stability of children and mothers’ chances for successful reentry and transition from inmate to parent.

In an effort to tackle some of the challenges associated with reunification, Hour Children has developed programs for incarcerated mothers that include residential nursery, visiting programs for children, children centered playrooms, parenting education
and advocacy courses, and host families. Mothers are afforded the opportunity to live with their infants for up to 18 months after birth while they attend school, work, or mandated programs, with the help of host families who provide housing and transportation for children to and from scheduled visits with incarcerated mothers.

**History of Female Imprisonment**

Women have been institutionalized since the early 1800s, suffering similar conditions as men such as filth, overcrowding, and harsh treatment. Women often suffer from sexual abuse by male guards (Encyclopedia.com, 2020). By the 1900s, prisons for women in America were dirty, crowded, unsupervised, and without adequate bedding, food, and other provisions. Women were often left without supervision, vulnerable to attack (Encyclopedia.com, 2020). In the 21st century, policies are beginning to emerge that address some of the issues faced by incarcerated women. The change in the delivery laws that prevent pregnant women from being shackled while giving birth represent an essential step for this population (Prison Reform and Redemption Act, 2017); however; research continues to display the need for improvement in the conditions in women's prisons (Butler, 2015; Kajstura, 2020; The Sentencing Project, 2020)

**Separation**

Sawyer and Bertram (2018) state that 219,000 women are incarcerated in the United States yearly; 80% of whom are mothers and 150,000 of whom are pregnant when admitted. Women who give birth while incarcerated are not allowed to spend time with their children after birth, except through the Hour Children program in Bedford Hills, NY, which allows mothers to remain with their child up to 18 months (Hour Children, 2020). Services and treatment, both inside and outside of the criminal justice system can
assist mothers to cope with actual and pending separation from their families and children (Celinska & Siegel, 2010).

Dallaire, Ciccone, and Wilson (2010) explored the impact of separation upon previously imprisoned mothers separated from their children due to drug offense convictions. Mothers expressed a variety of emotional adjustments to separation. By far, the most commonly referred adjustment reaction was depression due to loneliness. Mothers concluded that prolonged separation of mother and child is harmful to the parent-child relationship. At no time did mothers identify any positive aspects of their relationship with their children due to their extended incarceration.

In a study conducted by Hennen (2012), participants revealed that separation from their children was devastating. Mothers also reported that the forced separation from their children was one of the most painful experiences that all participants shared. In addition to having to leave their children in someone else's care, these women were impacted by the harsh side effects of going to jail (Sawyer, 2019). It's time we recognized that when we put women in prison, we inflict long-term damage to their families. Most incarcerated women would be better served through alternative programs in their communities (Sawyer & Bertram, 2018).

The mere act of being arrested initiates the process of isolation and separation. Celinska and Siegel (2010) conducted a study of women at different stages in the separation process, pretrial and in prison, to analyze the coping mechanisms of incarcerated women as they relate to separation from their children and families. Analysis suggests that the length of incarceration, number of visits or lack thereof, opportunity for
phone calls, and burden of expenses, in fact, add more stress and strain to incarcerated mothers (Celinska & Siegel, 2010).

**Length of Incarceration**

A study conducted by Rixey (2016), stated that mothers found reentry to be difficult regardless of the length of their incarceration. However, depending on the period of imprisonment, mothers are faced with the realization that children have grown up, they missed significant events, and their children often formed bonds with their caregivers (Rixey, 2016). Depending on the length of their sentences and the number of times they had been incarcerated, women in a study conducted by Ledyard (2013) reported having little contact with their children, with some having had no contact with their children during confinement. Women who reported having little contact with their children while they were incarcerated also mentioned having turbulent relationships with the child's caregiver.

**Visitation/Phone Calls**

Mothering from prison can be difficult if visits and phone calls are infrequent. Temple (2012) noted a correlation between the lack of visits and contact with children and creating a loss of maternal identity. Unfortunately, there are numerous barriers to visitation, such as caregiver resistance and geographical barriers. Research has shown that frequent visits are an indicator of successful reunification (Banley, 2017). Additionally, women who have a good relationship with their child’s caregiver reported more frequent communication with their children during incarceration. Strained relationships with children’s caretakers inadvertently cause strains on the mother/child relationship (Ledyard, 2013).
Visiting policies have strict guidelines and are inconsistent as they vary between prisons (Celinska & Siegel, 2010). Female correctional institutions are often more than 100 miles away from the families of inmates (Ledyard, 2013). As a result of the locations of some prison facilities, many caregivers must travel long distances for short visits. Obstacles such as these do not encourage maintaining connections between inmates and their families (Kajstura, 2019).

**Expenses**

Not only does incarceration remove a source of economic support for many families, it also imposes additional financial burdens on the caregiver (Cai, 2019). Research has identified the impact of visitation on the mothers and families of inmates, noting significant expenditures for visitation, phone calls, and letters (Banley, 2017; Ledyard, 2013; Temple, 2012). These costs place economic hardships on caregivers, some of whom were already under financial strain as they took on the role of primary provider for the children of these incarcerated mothers.

**Family Reunification**

In 2019, it was reported that 1,551 women are released from state prisons in NYS yearly and 28,241 from jails in NYS (Sawyer, 2019). Most incarcerated women are mothers and are often the primary caretakers of their children (Sawyer, 2019). Flores (2013) identified most mothers in a prison study suggested that they planned to reunite and reconnect with their children once they were released from prison.

Cooper-Sadlo (2015) conducted a study with 12 formerly incarcerated women where they were reunified with their children post-incarceration and regained legal guardianship. Reentry into their previous environments was reported to be overwhelming.
when trying to establish an active role in the lives of their children. Research participants described the process of reintegration as a complicated, problematic transition. All the women discussed the obstacles of reentry, which included obtaining and maintaining employment, securing stable housing, and providing for the day-to-day needs of their families. However, the most essential and challenging undertaking faced by the mothers was securing their place as a mother with their children and families (Cooper-Sadlo, 2015).

**Problem Statement**

The number of incarcerated women continues to grow. It is the responsibility of advocates to make sure these women are not left behind, and specific data is collected related to their needs and the needs of their families. Children of this population often experience childhood health problems, behavioral problems, and poor mental health. The correctional system has not adapted to the massive increase in incarcerated women. There is a growing need to develop new programs and evaluate existing programs to identify areas of improvement. Alternatives to incarceration should be explored to lessen the impact of family separation and address the health and well-being of individuals who are parents and/or are currently pregnant.

**Theoretical Rationale**

The ecological theory developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979) provides a framework for understanding how incarceration has affected the lives of families as it relates to stress, economic stability, behavioral issues, and health concerns. This framework may improve the understanding of mothers who have experienced challenges associated with
incarceration and lead to further research that improves the conditions and services available to assist this population.

This framework examines the relationship between the developing person and their environment. This lens enabled the researcher to understand the participants' situation as it is perceived rather than "objective reality" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The ecological theory is a systems model consisting of four levels: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory sheds light on examining ecological transitions, shifts in roles, or settings. Researchers using this theory as a framework are advised to evaluate a person's external factors and supportive environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes Level 1 (microsystem) "as a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics" (p. 22).

Level 2 (mesosystem) is defined as "the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates (such as a child, the relations among home, school and neighborhood peer group: For an adult, among family, work and social life" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25). Level 3 (exosystem) is defined as "one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25).

Lastly, Level 4 (macrosystem) refers to “the level of environmental influence that is most distal to the developing individual and that affects all other systems. It includes the values, traditions, and sociocultural characteristics of the larger society” (American
Psychological Association [APA], 2020, para. 1). Bronfenbrenner’s systems model was used in this study to explore how the qualities of people and their environment interact to influence how they develop and how they impact the lives of those around them.

**Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of women taking over as primary caregivers of their children post-incarceration. Further, the objective was to highlight the stories of formerly incarcerated women from New York State prisons to identify factors that contributed to their transition from inmate to parent and their experiences parenting post-incarceration. This study sought to explore the thoughts of post incarcerated women and their perceptions and experiences with reentry. This study aims to enable its readers to embrace the need for improvement within the criminal justice system as it relates to incarcerated women and programs geared towards developing the mother-child relationship during and post-incarceration. The State of New York must identify short and long-term outcomes for incarcerated mothers who will serve as the primary caregiver for their children.

This study outlines a qualitative phenomenon of the mother/child relationship post-incarceration, focusing on the experiences that the separation of incarceration had on the relationship. This study also seeks to bring to the forefront a need for transitional programs for incarcerated mothers who have the potential of being released and taking over as the primary caregiver of their child.

This research project addressed the social and personal circumstances that ex-offending mothers experience post-incarceration. Additionally, the researcher explored
how ex-offending mothers were able to adapt to their communities and identify the experiences or lack thereof, with parenting programs during and post-incarceration.

**Research Questions**

1. How do formerly incarcerated mothers describe their experience with parenting during incarceration?

2. What factors do mothers identify as influencing their experience with parenting during incarceration?

3. What role do mothers perceive the correctional facility playing in preparing them to transition from inmate to parent?

4. How do formerly incarcerated mothers describe their experiences with parenting post-incarceration?

**Significance of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to add new knowledge to the field of study focusing on parenting, separation, and transitional programs for incarcerated mothers. Implications of this study could be significant to corrections agencies, community professionals, policy makers, family members, and friends providing reintegration support to incarcerated mothers and their families. The United States has 4% of the world's female population, but 30% of its female incarcerated population (Kajstura, 2019). Two-thirds are mothers and primary caregivers to young children. The rate of increase of women in custody has outpaced men (Kajstura, 2019).

Information on mothers' incarceration status is not collected on birth certificates, and no agency collects birth data in prison (Sawyer, 2019). The Bureau of Justice Statistics (Sawyer, 2019) collects data on deaths during custody but not births during
custody. Information about imprisoned women's pregnancy can help improve outcomes for mothers and their children beyond pregnancy. Research conducted by Sufrin, Beal, Clarke, Jones, and Mosher (2019) highlighted a substantial number of women who will arrive pregnant and will have pregnancy-specific health care needs that must be addressed. This research speaks to the need to address the numerous complexities of motherhood as an offender.

Definitions of Terms

*Primary Caregivers* – the person with the primary custody and responsibility for children's day-to-day care (Arditti & Savla, 2013).

Chapter Summary

The importance of investing in studying and understanding the population of incarcerated mothers to encourage justice reform is warranted. Organizations and policy makers need to implement change on the local and state level to improve reform. The incarceration of mothers becomes a community problem as it creates separation between mothers, children, family, and community. Reentry programs are few for the population of confined mothers. Investing in the development and improvement of reentry programs is a critical step towards increasing job attainment, reducing recidivism, improving the well-being of the community, and strengthening the mother/child relationship.

Policy makers and correction administrators need to expand the eligibility and accessibility to reentry services. Partnerships should be developed with the community, employers, correction administrators, nurses, etc., to strengthen the prioritization of reentry programs for incarcerated mothers. Data from this study can be used to develop standards of care for incarcerated mothers and calculate the needs of these marginalized
women and their families. Despite the problematic reunification process, ex-offending women maintain the hope that the mother/child relationship can heal, and they can build strong, healthy bonds with their children and their families.

Chapter 2 will provide a review of the literature. Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology. Chapter 4 will provide the findings of the research and Chapter 5 discusses the implications of the research study.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Purpose

This dissertation work seeks to examine the challenges experienced by mothers post-incarceration as related to raising their children. Investigating this population's needs will help understand family engagement, the need for community support, and highlight areas of the criminal justice system that could use improvement (Cooper-Sadlo, 2018). The barriers mothers face post-incarceration are great and range from stigmatization from society, family difficulties, lack of finances, inadequate housing, and making mandatory parole/probation appointments.

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of mothers assuming their role as primary caregivers of their children post-incarceration. It also sought to explore the thoughts of post-incarcerated women, their perceptions, and experiences with reentry. This body of work aims to enable its readers to embrace the need for improvement within the criminal justice system as it relates to incarcerated women and programs geared towards developing the mother-child relationship during and post-incarceration.

Further, this study also sought to bring to the forefront a need for transitional programs for incarcerated mothers who have the potential of being released and taking over as the primary caregiver of their child. Additionally, the researcher sought to explore how ex-offending mothers were able to adapt to their communities and identify the experiences, or lack thereof, with parenting programs during and post-incarceration.
Incarcerated Women and Mothers

Indiana Women's Prison (IWP) is the oldest state prison in the nation and the first female maximum security facility. IWP developed a parenting program geared to equip mothers with tools to nurture children, and offers extended visitation, cooking, and games for children. Additionally, the prison initiated a program for pregnant and incarcerated women to live with their newborns for up to 18 months (Faris & Miller, 2010). This is similar to the program developed in New York by The Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, allowing new mothers to spend up to 18 months with their children to bond (Hour Children, 2020).

The laws currently in place for children of incarcerated mothers require states to request termination of parental rights of children who have been in state care for over 1 year; however, this does not apply if a child is living with a relative. The loss of custody makes developing/redeveloping the mother/child relationship challenging. These laws are often debated in court and manipulated by policies. Sufrin et al. (2019) stated the real work needs to be conducted between correctional staff and inmates who work together daily.

Faris and Miller (2010) suggested implementing problem-solving courts to monitor employment, housing, and updates regarding child care. In their study, the women felt the court system to be ineffective in helping mothers work with caretakers and anyone who participated in the ecological levels of the child's development. Quality parenting in prison is a reach; however, children and their mothers need to bond. It is incumbent to resolve social service and community issues related to strengthening the mother/child relationship (Jacobsen & Lempert, 2013).
Inadequate support services and trauma impact the experience of incarcerated mothers. Rixey (2016) conducted a study to examine how African American women perceive their experiences with reentry. Participants reported the struggles of obtaining housing that meets parole/probation criteria and the need to provide this information before release. Oftentimes inmates transitioning into reentry are not allowed to live with family members due to criminal backgrounds, location, and safety concerns (Rixey, 2016). Parental incarceration can sever the family relationship and result in little to no family engagement.

Trauma, abuse, substance abuse, and lack of finances have been noted to cause females to be incarcerated (Kubiak et al., 2017; Pataki, Robison, & Altman, 2016; Rixey, 2016). Women carry these experiences with them, and without receiving counseling or support from family members and correction officials, they are often released with the same stressors. Post-incarceration, many of the women in this study described difficulty adjusting to children who have grown up, changed, and formed close relationships with their caregivers (Rixey, 2016). Separation of mother/child has a detrimental effect on both mother and child, especially if child protective services are involved.

Research has further displayed (Jones, Worthen, Sharp, & McLeod, 2018; Kubiak et al., 2017) a high rate of sexual assault from authoritative figures in female institutions. The severity of victimization was identified; of the 179 women interviewed (Kubiak et al., 2017), 400 incidents of sexual misconduct were reported. To protect this population, policy makers implemented the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) and the federal Prisoner Litigation Reform Act (PLRA). Notably, although these policies have been
developed, the officials to whom women must report acts of misconduct are often the individuals at the forefront of the abuse (Jones et al., 2018).

Effects of Female Incarceration (Caregivers, Children and Community)

Roberts (2012) conducted research that uncovered that parental incarceration causes family stress from worrying about inmate's safety and from tension as they struggle during the parents' absence. Prisons are often located in remote areas that are far away from inmates' communities. Also, visitation expenses (travel, gas, hotel, time off from work, etc.), telephone calls, and stationery can become costly. Caregivers rarely receive adequate support, and many are not equipped to handle the increase in expenses associated with raising children. However, many family caregivers take on this responsibility to prevent children from being placed in foster care (Roberts, 2012). Unfortunately, the conditions of incarceration, current policies, and child welfare services make parenting while incarcerated virtually impossible.

Jackson (2011) conducted a study of 24 mothers who had 66 children carrying the load of having a mother in prison. Thirty of the children were cared for by their fathers, and 13 children were looked after by their maternal grandmothers. The rest of the children associated with this study were being cared for by different family members, except one child in state custody. Participants in this study kept a record of their contact with their children during their incarceration (Jackson, 2011).

Of the participants, four had no contact with their children, 16 had one visit, and 12 mothers could speak with their children over the phone once a month. The remaining mothers reported receiving at least one letter a month from their children. The mothers in this study expressed their plans for reunification with their children and the hope of their
families being united (Jackson, 2011). Incarceration affects schools, neighborhoods, and caregivers in addition to the offender. Jackson (2011) recommended that programs be developed that promote health and life skills as a starting point for rehabilitation. Most of the mothers in this study discussed the challenges of being a good parent before incarceration but expressed their desire to be a better parent post-release.

Further, Butler's (2015) research directly relates to that of Jackson (2011), expressing the limitations to social, financial, and community resources available for incarcerated mothers, especially caregivers. Five caregivers of children with an incarcerated mother participated in this study. Consistent with other research (Faris & Miller, 2010; Jones et al., 2018; Kubiak et al., 2017) caregivers did not anticipate nor were they prepared to assume the role as a caregiver to children. It was explained that adopting this role comes with physical and psychological stress regarding parenting obligations during the absence of the child's mother (Butler, 2015).

Caregivers are a vital resource for providing care to children with an incarcerated mother. These caregivers receive limited financial and support services. Upon incarceration, informal caregivers should receive a consultation and a resource guide of support services to ease system navigation (Butler, 2015). Services for caregivers can be developed to support positive social engagement and strengthen information sharing. Organizations can create informational literature outlining financial assistance program criteria. This could potentially assist caregivers with identifying appropriate resources (Butler, 2015).

There is often only one women's facility within a state, which increases separation by placing mothers hundreds of miles away from their families. This distance puts a
financial strain on families oftentimes already struggling. Caregivers must pay for transportation, stationary, and phone calls (Kasiborski, 2014). Modern technology has been suggested to increase cost-effective communication between mother and child during maternal incarceration (i.e., Skype, Apple Facetime, Messenger, etc.). Nearly 60% of women in prison have reported that they have never had a visit with their children. Research continues to identify the need for both programs and policies targeting families and communities to improve outcomes for children of incarcerated parents (Kasiborski, 2014).

One of the biggest sources of stress identified is the possibility of termination of parental rights (Kennedy, 2012). Mothers and children need to maintain contact during parental incarceration. Research brings to light the need to develop standards for facilitating communication between mother and child to limit family disruption (Kennedy, 2012). In the absence of a relative or friend to care for children during incarceration, welfare agencies should aim to secure foster care placement in the child's community to return them to their families (Kennedy, 2012).

When mothers are incarcerated, the consequences for their children are severe. Moreover, Cai (2014) referred to the loss of parental income as a stressor for the parent, child, and caregiver. The financial strains associated with incarceration exacerbate a family's ability to stay together, communicate with the incarcerated parent, and create reintegration barriers. Incarceration of a parent can cause a caregiver to leave their job, seek welfare support, and exhaust savings. Not only does a child lose the mother's physical care, but the financial strain can also diminish resources and lead to increased stress and instability for the remaining family (Cai, 2014).
Ledyard (2013) described another barrier faced by incarcerated mothers, which is strained relationships with caregivers. Due to past experiences, family members oftentimes do not consider these women fit to be parents and will restrict contact between mother and child. Participants in this study refer to the pressure of trying to convince caretakers of their desire and ability to be suitable parents. Many females’ arrests are drug-related (Jones et al., 2018). Caregivers are often aware of previous drug use and minimize a mother's contact with her children. Although most mothers in this study reported that they had visits from their children, they were infrequent (Ledyard, 2013).

Policy makers, corrections officials, and community organizations need to understand that ex-offenders are not the only people who benefit from their desisting from crime. Corrections officials should address the lack of effective treatment programs within prison facilities to give these inmates a better chance at maintaining sobriety upon reentry (Ledyard, 2013). Also, more educational and job training programs can help prepare these women for success in the legitimate labor market and provide them with the means to support their families. Legislators and corrections officials should start taking a more active role in developing and reforming programs that address the unique needs of women inmates who identify as mothers and take into account the damaging effects of incarceration on families, especially when it is the primary caretaker who is incarcerated (Butler, 2015; Cai, 2014; Jackson, 2011; Kasiborski, 2014).

**Rules and Regulations (Laws, Parole, and Probation)**

Of all of the laws and policies, rules, and regulations set forth by the government and correctional institutions, many pales when compared to the shackling of pregnant women bound by hands and feet (Bloom, 2014). There are also instances where a
pregnant woman can have chains wrapped around her during transport and/or labor.

Bloom (2014) conducted a study of the experiences of women who were pregnant during incarceration. The testimony of a participant (Dana) should be highlighted. At the time of conviction, Dana was 5 months pregnant. Although she received regular check-ups, she was expected to work as the other inmates, carrying boxes and working on the loading dock. Even as her belly grew, Dana was transported to the doctor's office, shackles on both hands and feet, with a chain around her stomach. It should be noted that during one visit, Dana tripped over her leg shackles. Thankfully, she fell on her hip and not the baby; however, the guards refused to remove the restraints for follow-up appointments. Finally, during labor, she was bound to the gurney for the next 10 hours, unable to walk around for comfort or even receive an epidural for pain. The added stress caused the baby to go into distress, and physicians were forced to perform a cesarean section. Nevertheless, even while unconscious, guards refused to remove the shackles (Bloom, 2014).

The current standards demonize mothers without providing them the necessary support to fulfill their roles. Society uses these mothers' sentencing as proof of their inability to parent and evidence of the need for restraint and state assistance (Bloom, 2014; Kennedy, 2012). Therefore, the focus needs to be placed on the support of parental rights and the well-being of the child.

Incarcerated mothers undeniably face unique obstacles making reentry difficult. To better understand these women's challenges, Robison (2014) conducted a study interviewing women concerning the experiences with parole and probation during the reentry period. Women described the struggle that comes with trying to be a good
parolee and a good mother. Probation and parole officers are sources of community support. Each has the potential of making or breaking a women's experiences with reentry. Participants suggested that probation/parole officers attempt to get to know them as people to open up the doors of communication regarding supervision and motherhood (Robison, 2014).

Prison policy allows a small window of time for inmates to make phone calls. Suppose an inmate places a call and receives a busy signal or no answer; they are left to wait until the next telephone opportunity, which could only be once per month (Wilson, 2010). Wilson's (2010) study made suggestions that are in direct connection with the research conducted thus far (Bloom, 2014; Robison, 2014) mothers should be relocated to institutions closer to their home, developing support to foster visitation to strengthen the bond between mother and child and increase family support. Wilson (2010) further identified the need for improved community-based support for caregivers, counseling, and in-prison parenting programs. Incarceration, in conjunction with prison location, can make contact impossible and negatively impact the mother/child relationship.

Further, Wilson (2010) offered a suggestion that was only highlighted in this study, that institutions provide instructional role-playing sessions to address parenting and issues related to telephone calls and in-person visits to develop skills and lessen fear and anxiety. Mothers in this study explained how regulations create obstacles when trying to parent behind bars. Mandatory sentences, prison locations, visitation policies, and collect phone calls do not foster the women's desire to be good mothers. The incarceration of a mother can permanently damage the family. Especially in instances where the child has bonded with the caregiver, reunification can sometimes be
impossible. Wilson (2010) stated, "One wonders if these harsh and inhumane policies were designed as part of the prison punishment, or even extended to the further dissolution of the family, and the possibility of resuming family life" (p. 226).

Equally important, a review of the current child welfare policy reported that caseworkers lacked in communicating with mothers and were unaware of the importance of visitation during incarceration to strengthen the mother and child relationship. Cooper-Sadlo's (2015) study interviewed women regarding their coping mechanisms throughout the duration of incarceration. Women discussed the importance of the safety of their children. For mothers who have lost custody, in order to regain custody they are required to work a system geared for them to fail. Upon release, mothers are expected to make mandatory appointments with parole/probation officers, and secure employment and housing.

Additionally, if a mother has a felony drug conviction, she cannot receive public assistance (Arditti & Sayla, 2015). Mental health issues, substance abuse, inadequate housing, and economic instability need to be addressed before custody is reinstated; however, information for services of this nature are not provided while incarcerated (Cooper-Sadlo, 2015). The available research has contributed valuable information regarding incarcerated mothers and their families' unique needs and offers new perspectives for developing programs and influencing change.

**Support Systems, Visitation, and Communication**

Beyond traditional visitation, institutions need to offer enhanced visitation options to encourage contact between incarcerated mothers and their children. Mignon and Ransford (2012) conducted a study offering visitation alternatives to include vouchers for
bus/train/taxi for corrections and social service agencies. These alternatives could help families improve the visiting process. In-person visits between mother and child give mothers a chance to parent in real-time (Mignon & Ransford, 2012).

The following alternatives suggested for visitation were only identified in this study. Examples included overnight visits on the prison grounds, day camps, mother-child days, programs that involve mother and child engagement, and parenting classes allowing mothers to practice the skills that have been learned (Mignon & Ransford, 2012). Moreover, these enhanced visitations can help mothers learn from their peers and allow them to interact with children in similar situations. Contact with family during incarceration can make the separation more bearable. As Wilson (2010) mentioned, Mignon and Ransford (2012) also referred to the possibility of cyber-visits using video platforms to connect mother/child. Allowing mothers access to computers provides an opportunity for electronic mail and internet telephone calls, which can cut costs for caregivers. Providing additional support services for caregivers and children can promote stability for the mother/child relationship.

In like manner, Grumbach (2014) interviewed a group of incarcerated mothers regarding their experiences with parental incarceration, stress, caretakers, and visitation. Many of the women interviewed spoke of parenting and reentry as a process. The participants identified the following factors as part of the process of parenting post-incarceration: reacquaintance, where the mother had to learn the child's behaviors; readjustment, where the mother learns of the parenting styles implemented by the caregivers, and reauthorizing, where a mother reestablishes her role as a parent and develops trust (Grumbach, 2014). During the interview process, one of the participants
articulated that maintaining contact with her children during incarceration made reestablishing her role post-incarceration a swift transition. It was believed that these positive relationships fostered their ability to parent while incarcerated.

Equally important, preparing for parenting post-release requires mothers to be realistic about their children's receptiveness. The study conducted by Barnes and Stringer (2013) referred to the possibility of mothers experiencing rejection from children or caregivers and having to answer uncomfortable questions related to their absence and incarceration. This study's findings indicated that mothers have a greater opportunity for successful reentry with parenting post-incarceration when they can communicate with their families while incarcerated via letters, phone calls, and visitation (Grumbach, 2014; Mignon & Ransford, 2012).

Frustration with parenting during incarceration is reduced when mothers can engage with their families (Barnes & Stringer, 2013). Unfortunately, family programs tailored to encourage bonding are often unavailable or unattainable due to the criteria required for participation, which greatly impedes contact with children and family. Conducted in a Chicago-based prison, this study interviewed mothers who participated in a family program that allows special visitation, including activities with toys and games. Besides, participants partake in holiday parties and family summer camps (Barnes & Stringer, 2013).

Increased opportunities for family contact during incarceration can stimulate the possibility of family reunification. It has been thoroughly documented in the research conducted thus far (Barnes & Stringer, 2013; Grumbach, 2014; Mignon & Ransford, 2012) that the lack of contact between mother and child during parental incarceration
decreases well-being. Recommendations continue to be made (Hissel, Bijleveld, & Kruttschmitt, 2011), calling for an improvement in policies and procedures that encourage family reunification during and post-incarceration. However, due to fewer women's facilities, maintaining contact with family members during incarceration can oftentimes be impossible.

Caregivers frequently struggle with traveling significant distances, financial responsibilities, and harsh visitation policies, which can ultimately prevent caretakers from actively participating in communicating with incarcerated mothers (Hissel et al., 2011). In many facilities, regular visitation hours are during school hours. The visitations offered for mothers on weekends are limited to children of certain ages, which deeply affects the relationships or the ability to develop one (Hissel et al., 2011).

**Reentry Programs and Parenting Programs**

Evidence suggests that parental relationships are essential to women's reentry process (Faris & Miller, 2010; Ledyard, 2013; Mignon & Ransford, 2012; Pataki et al., 2016). Reentry offers many challenges for ex-offenders to reintegrate, such as securing housing, employment, treatment, and complying with parole or probation conditions. Cobbina (2009) conducted a study of female inmates to understand the factors that impact their community reentry. Women described the challenges of reestablishing family ties, receiving custody of their children, parenting, and repairing severed relationships. Some women admitted that they were not prepared for the responsibility of parenting their children and establishing their role as a mother and primary caregiver (Cobbina, 2009). It should be noted that several mothers expressed the difficulty of
trying to establish relationships with children who were disrespectful to them by not listening or by talking back, adding to the stress of reunification.

In like manner, research by Garzarelli (2011) suggested that a positive family relationship and participating in parenting programs while incarcerated have a positive impact on reentry. Garzarelli (2011) identified that strengthening family ties can enhance the reentry process for both parent and child. Improving opportunities for incarcerated mothers to actively participate in parenting programs can enhance family relationships and reduce recidivism. Pataki et al. (2016) affirmed that education programs, specifically parenting programs, positively impact children of incarcerated parents and can be considered a prevention program to reduce recidivism and prevent children from becoming offenders themselves.

Parenting programs allow incarcerated mothers the opportunity to strengthen parenting skills. Incarcerated mothers need comprehensive parenting programs that address the challenges associated with children, spouses, and caretakers while in prison (Garzarelli, 2011). A mother's time in prison should be used for rehabilitation and preparation for reentry, parenting, and reestablishing relationships. These programs are essential during incarceration, but they are needed throughout the reentry process, and possibly even more so post-release. These programs should be developed collectively between the correctional, probation/parole, and social service agencies (Barnes & Stringer, 2013; Cobbina, 2009; Grumbach, 2014). Research continues to show the need for the criminal justice system to understand and address the changes that need to be made related to the parental rights of incarcerated mothers (Bloom, 2014; Robison, 2014; Wilson, 2010).
Similarly, Cox (2009) referred to the need for parenting programs that address mothers' psychological needs in prison and socialization, family engagement, and interaction. In fact, maintaining any contact with children becomes a challenge for many of the offender mothers. Incarcerated mothers may have little contact with their children due to numerous barriers, including location, finances, rules and regulations, and family relationships (Butler, 2015; Jackson, 2011; Kennedy, 2012). The institutions that house these women are oftentimes more than 100 miles away from home. Mothers in this situation are at the mercy of others to drive their children for visits.

Parenting programs should include improving mother/child relationships through parent education and mother/child interaction. Research suggests that relationship-building tools are a good foundation for parenting education programs (Cox, 2009). Mothers are oftentimes not prepared to resume the role of primary caregiver, nor are children prepared for the mother's release. A mother's release from prison can cause tension and create stress when a child has spent prolonged time being cared for by others and has established relationships with their caregivers. Children in these situations may display resentment towards a shift in disciplinarians (Cox, 2009). This is often amplified when the caregiver during the mother's incarceration is a grandparent. It has been noted (Bloom, 2014; Garzarelli, 2011; Grumbach, 2014) that grandparents become attached to the children and express concerns about the mothers resuming parenting roles, which can make reestablishing a mother's role difficult.

In a study conducted by Cox (2009), incarcerated mothers participated in a parenting program before their prison release. Women who attended the classes suggested that the program gave them a new way of looking at parenting. Many
expressed their desire to get home and develop a relationship with their children. Their
comments suggested that the class had given them a new way of looking at raising their
children. The offenders said that the class offered them instruction on how to have a
positive sense of themselves and be realistic. Mothers mentioned that this class allowed
them to feel as though they could make a difference in their children's lives (Cox, 2009).

Temple (2012) found that high parental stress levels can lead to depression before
and during incarceration. Mothers report separation from their children as their primary
stressor during incarceration. In addition to anxiety related to reunification, the
disintegration of the parent-child relationship and fear that children may resent them,
having developed strong bonds with alternative caregivers are also stressors (Temple,
2012). Parenting related services should aim to assist with parenting education and the
psychological issues that arise from separation (Temple, 2012).

In a study conducted by Celinska and Siegel (2010), women were interviewed and
asked to share their parenting stories during incarceration. Mothers who participated
discussed their attempts to continue performing their roles as mothers while defending
their parenting skills against family and child services (Celinska & Siegel, 2010). Thus
far, the stories of these women and the research document the challenges of parenting,
reunification, and readjustments, such as securing employment, housing, healthcare, and
treatment. This population may benefit from case management services that focus on
incarcerated mothers' specific needs while in prison and community services post-
incarceration (Celinska & Siegel, 2010).

Although there is a need for parenting programs during imprisonment, it is
crucial to develop reintegration and reunification programs at the community level to
assist mothers with some of the challenges discussed previously (Celinska and Siegel, 2010). Women could benefit from peer interaction to help with coping skills and community resources to serve as a source of empowerment. Further, female offenders touched on issues with family distrust, shame, guilt, and social stigma. These are all issues that can be addressed in various support programs within the prison and the community to assist with self-transformation and building confidence (Cobbina, 2009; Cooper-Sadlo, 2015; Cox, 2009).

A former inmate from Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, who also served as a teacher of a parenting class, discussed the benefits of the mother-child bond. The women who participated in the facility's parenting class stated that their children would be safer with them in prison than in some low-income housing or foster care environments (Gilad & Gat, 2013). Unfortunately, it is argued by lawmakers and correctional administrators that prison is not an appropriate place for children as they miss their opportunity for daily activities and deprives children of fundamental rights. Others who are opposed to children in prison worry that mothers might use their child as an excuse to participate in programs and activities (Gilad & Gat, 2013). However, research has shown that participation in parenting programs allows incarcerated mothers a chance to avoid prolonged separation and take advantage of services being offered for self-growth and reunification.

Preparing mothers to resume their role as primary caregivers should be a major part of the rehabilitation process. The current state of research on female prisoners suggests that parenting programs, while incarcerated, provide mothers the opportunity to improve on their skills in a controlled environment where they can receive guidance,
training, and identify the skills and techniques used by other mothers (Gilad & Gat, 2013). Studies also show that mothers who maintain close relationships with their children and family are more successful with parenting and reunification post-release (Gilad & Gat, 2013).

The literature describes parenting programs as sources for enhancing relationships while preparing both mother and family for release (Rossiter et al., 2015). It has been suggested that services need to close the gap by linking them together to provide education, assistance with foster care, and the family environment's hurdles. Maternal incarceration can have negative outcomes for children, and programs that support strengthening the mother/child relationship can ensure that they are linked to resources to promote skill development and develop the maternal role (Rossiter et al., 2015).

Several authors (Barnes & Stringer, 2013; Grumbach, 2014; Hissel et al., 2011; Mignon & Ransford, 2012), have indicated that it is critical for communities to develop programs that address the difficulties faced by mothers and children of incarcerated mothers during and post-release. A study conducted by Laasko and Nygaard (2012) evaluated a mentoring program for children of incarcerated mothers offered by the Department of Corrections and Big Brothers/Big Sisters program to pair trained mentors with children of incarcerated parents.

Laasko and Nygaard (2012) found it critical to better understand the components that contribute to children's adjustment during and post-release of parental incarceration. It has been mentioned that understanding the challenges of these women and children can help to create a balance between risks and resources to assist in rehabilitation, family reunification, and reintegration.
The evaluation by Laasko and Nygaard (2012) also discussed the potential benefit of coordinating with agencies that can pinpoint incarcerated parents' children and provide them with information for available resources. The Laasko and Nygaard (2012) study identified the need for outside support for children of incarcerated mothers. It made recommendations for mentoring as a form of support to assist with these children's unique issues.

In addition to providing resources during incarceration and post-release, Menting, Orobio de Castro, Wijngaards-de Meij, and Matthys (2014) recognized the importance of intervention timing. It seems plausible that mothers should have access to parental programs during incarceration when it is easiest to reach these women. Menting et al. (2014) advocated that parenting classes should reach past generic parenting techniques and address the myriad issues these women face, such as education, mental health, stress, and recidivism. Further, Menting et al. (2014) commented on the possible benefits of home visits for mothers to practice parenting skills and problem-solving around the period close to release.

Banley (2017) further touched on the mental health needs of incarcerated women reentering the community. A group of women interviewed during a group substance treatment program at a transitional facility discussed their need for accessible treatment that included healthy food, exercise, mental healthcare, and community connections. Arditti and Savla (2013) took it a step further researching the trauma associated with parental incarceration, especially the incarceration of a mother who is often the thread that holds the family together. Visitation during incarceration has been linked to positive outcomes for the mother and can have mixed children's responses. Visitation can

Notably, Hennen (2012) interviewed previously incarcerated mothers who had minor children and were in the process of gaining custody and were currently living in a reentry transitional housing program in Northern California. This study's findings, coupled with the research conducted thus far (Banley, 2017; Gilad & Gat, 2013; Rossiter et al., 2015) mothers discussed the distress associated with separation from their children and their desire for forgiveness. Women in this study believed their participation in this reentry program would provide stability and offer tools to help them be successful mothers (Hennen, 2012). With the high percentage of females of childbearing age and the increase in female offenders, there is a need to address the separation that will arise related to bonding, breastfeeding, and nurturing (Sufrin et al., 2019).

In like manner, a study conducted by Cooper and Sadlo (2018) interviewed twelve mothers regarding the experiences as mothers before, during, and post-incarceration. All of the women in the study described the love they had for their children and their desire to protect and provide for them. Cooper and Sadlo (2018) also touched on the distress of separation during incarceration, and that acceptance and forgiveness were beginnings to recovery. When discussing the challenges associated with reentry, these women, together with women in previous research (Jacobsen & Lempert, 2013; Kennedy, 2012; Wilson, 2010) continue to convey the difficulties with accessing available services. These mothers advocated holistic services that include addressing substance abuse, mental health, physical health, and parenting skills.
Research continues to suggest that addressing these women's needs can strengthen the individual, family, and community.

Equally important, Flores (2013) conducted a study suggesting that child welfare and criminal justice systems should develop a sharing system to coordinate services and foster family reunification. The research conducted by Flores (2013) is in agreement with previous and current research (Banley, 2017; Cooper-Sadlo, 2018; Hennen, 2012) that there is a lack of available programs to address the vast needs of incarcerated mothers. Providing additional programs can assist in decreasing the stress levels associated with reentry, parenting, and recidivism.

Research conducted by Sufrin et al. (2019) referred to many women who arrive pregnant and have pregnancy-specific needs during incarceration. Conducted in a California women's jail, Sufrin et al. (2019) interviewed workers, medical staff, and inmates regarding the care offered to pregnant women. Although the constitutional mandate is that all prisoners have the right to receive healthcare, there is tension about who is responsible and what type of care do inmates deserve.

**Chapter Summary**

The United States criminal justice system continues to be a haven for bureaucracy comprised of policies, rules and regulations that, in fact, display little signs of rehabilitation (Sufrin et al., 2019). The voices of incarcerated mothers during and post-release continue to cry out for additional services to help foster their expectations of what a good mother is and how they can be that for their children. With more disadvantages than opportunities, incarcerated mothers struggle to deal with stress, stigmatism, trauma,
drug addiction, guilt, shame, and mental illness, making reentry and reunification an uphill battle (Cooper & Sadlo, 2018).

A mother's struggle to create normalcy post-release is magnified by the challenges associated with securing housing, employment, and making mandatory appointments (Laasko & Nygaard, 2012; Menting et al., 2014; Rossiter et al., 2015). Thus far, the research highlights the need for wrap-around services that address the needs of incarcerated mothers during and post-incarceration (Arditti & Savla, 2013; Banley, 2017; Hennen, 2012). The narratives of these women can communicate knowledge and assist in developing policies on the local, state, and federal levels. Chapter 3 will provide the details of the research methodology.
Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

Introduction

There are currently over two million women in prisons and jails in the United States (Sawyer & Wagner, 2019). The population of female prisoners is the fastest growing group of offenders in the United States (The Sentencing Project, 2020). The female inmate population represents only a fraction of the total population of offenders but is still a significant issue as it creates a rise in family separation (Kahya & Ekinci, 2018). The Office for Child and Family Services (2020), reports that 105,000 children have mothers who are or have been incarcerated. Eighty percent of incarcerated women are mothers with children 18 and under, most being primary caregivers to their children (Sawyer & Bertram, 2018).

Given the large female prisoner population, there is a need for transitional programs that focus on parenting and developing the mother/child relationship designed to help female inmates overcome challenges associated with reentry and separation (Ledyard, 2013). Women have become the fastest growing of the incarcerated population and are often an afterthought in the big picture of the entire prison population (Sawyer & Bertram, 2018). Incarcerated women who are mothers or currently pregnant require more attention related to the challenges of separation, parenting, reentry, and identifying the disruption and insecurity associated with imprisonment and lack of contact. Women have different physical needs and often enter prison with a history of abuse, trauma, and mental health concerns. (Menting et al., 2014). There is a need for services for
incarcerated mothers during and post-release to develop tools to prepare for reentry (Prison Reform and Redemption Act, 2017).

Most women offenders are mothers, creating a concern about what happens to the mother-child relationship during and after incarceration as women are more likely than men to be primary caregivers to their children (Lee, Porter, & Comfort, 2014). Mignon and Ransford (2012) identified challenges associated with maintaining communication with incarcerated mothers and children, such as the location of the prison facility, lack of finances of the caregivers for phone calls, travel, or letters and policies surrounding visitation.

In 2015, over 4,000 children had mothers who were incarcerated in New York State (Nichols, Loper, & Meyer, 2015). Most children of incarcerated parents have little to no contact with their mothers. Regular family contact can ease the disruption and help the reunification process when incarcerated mothers are released from prison and decrease the likelihood of recidivism (Cooper-Sadlo, 2018). Prolonged separation can cause severe damage to the mother-child relationship.

**Research Context**

New York State currently has three female correctional institutions on the state level and two facilities on the federal level (Correction Association of New York, 2019). As of 2018, NYS is housing over 2200 female inmates (Correction Association of New York, 2019). The NYS prison system is governed by The State of Commission of Corrections (SCOC) (Commission of Corrections, 2020). Of the five female correctional institutions The Bedford Hills Women's Correctional Facility has shown itself to be the only progressive institution when it comes to meeting the ever-changing needs of
incarcerated women and their families. At this facility courses are offered that range from mental health, parenting, and stress management. Most notably would be The Hour Children program at the Bedford Hills facility which is one of nine prisons in the nation with a nursery for mothers and children. This facility allows mothers to live with their children for up to 18 months following childbirth (Hour Children, 2018).

According to Prison Policy Initiative (2020) 4% of women live in the United States however, the US makes up of 30% of the world’s incarcerated women. In 2019, 19 of every 100,000 women were incarcerated in New York State (The Sentencing Project, 2020). In addition, almost 73% of New York’s incarcerated women are parents (Correction Association of New York, 2019). More than 60% of women in state prisons have children under the age of 18 (The Sentencing Project, 2019). In an effort to tackle some of the challenges associated with incarcerated mothers and their children this qualitative study was conducted which included four formerly incarcerated female participants residing in New York State, who served a minimum of 5 years in prison and had children during their imprisonment.

**Research Participants**

The research plan was approved by the St. John Fisher IRB (See Appendix A). The population included four formerly incarcerated mothers who assumed the role of primary caregiver of their children post-incarceration. The researcher sought three to five participants who identified as mothers and were formerly incarcerated in a NYS correctional facility. Creswell (2013), defined an appropriate sample size for case studies between three to five participants. The researcher’s decision to study multiple participants was to receive an in-depth, rich understanding of the personal experiences
faced by a formerly incarcerated woman as it related to motherhood. Creswell and Poth (2017) refer to the benefits of narrative research and case studies as examples of ways to develop a story and explore the life of an individual.

Gustafsson (2017), mentions the purpose of case studies is not to analyze cases but is a way to define cases and explore their settings. Multiple case studies are measured as strong and reliable (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Further, multiple case studies create convincing results when the data gathered derives from more than one participant. Multiple cases allow for the exploration of research questions and theory (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

Multiple case studies come with advantages and difficulties. Conducting these studies can be extremely time consuming, and the researcher may have less time to study the cases (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Creswell (2013) states case studies are useful when exploring real-life, single or multiple cases over time, through in-depth data collection to report descriptions and themes.

The age, religious, or political affiliations were not factors used to obtain the participant volunteers. Participants were gathered through purposeful sampling. The snowball method was also utilized. Individual participants selected for the study had the most prolonged duration of separation from their children, regardless of their age. Focusing on this population may improve services offered to incarcerated mothers to aid in handling the challenges of separation and preparing them for motherhood as a primary caregiver post-incarceration.
Instruments Used in Data Collection

This study used a multistage design for data collection that included an interview question piloting stage where the interview questions were tested for reliability and the data-gathering stage where questions were refined and administered to the participants. Further, the data analysis stage where interviews were coded. Handouts were used for the recruitment of participants. Handouts and follow up e-mails with individuals ensured they met the criteria for participation. The researcher, handouts, and an audio recording device were the instruments used for data collection. The researcher and the audio recording device were used for individual interviews. For this study, the researcher served as a reporter on the experiences of formerly incarcerated mothers that relate to maintaining and developing the mother/child relationship and their role as primary caregiver post-incarceration. A handout (Appendix B) served as the invitation to participate. Participants signed the informed consent (Appendix C). Interview questions are provided in Appendix D.

Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis

The anticipated timeline for this research study was 1 to 3 months. Following St. John Fisher College IRB approval handouts were distributed at local churches, libraries, and laundromats with the consent of those organizations. The handout included contact information for the researcher, an overview of the study, and the criteria for participation (Appendix B). When interested participants inquired, the researcher communicated via e-mail to ensure that they met the criteria and a brief overview was provided.

A follow-up letter describing the study and informed consent letter were e-mailed to the selected participants. Additionally, the researcher reconfirmed the participants'
willingness to continue. Each participant was informed that the interview would be recorded. Once the informed consent had been completed, interviews were scheduled. The researcher was available via e-mail. The researcher allowed the participant to select a date and time of their choosing to make things comfortable and convenient for participation.

Twenty-four hours before the interview, the researcher sent out a reminder e-mail to each participant confirming the meeting location and time. On the day of the interview, the researcher arrived at the set location early to ensure recording devices were charged. The audio equipment was tested for sound quality. The researcher advised the participants that they could stop the interview at any time to take a break or if they felt uncomfortable for any reason. A list of counseling options were provided to the participants following the completion of the interview. This measure was taken to safeguard participants in the event of emotions that need to be addressed following the interview.

The interview was guided by research and interview questions. The researcher made notes of any mannerisms and gestures that were unable to be picked up by the audio recording. Participants did not receive compensation. Each participant was given a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. All recordings and participants' identities will be stored on a password-protected drive belonging to the researcher, as well as, on a password-protected computer belonging to the researcher.

Data analysis began with transcription. The interview recordings were sent to the transcriber within 24 hours. The transcription service used was Rev.com. Following transcription, the researcher reviewed the information received to check for accuracy and
become familiarized with the data. The researcher cleaned the data and removed any "ums" or repetitive responses. The researcher included information from notes taken and verbal or nonverbal cues that were identified during the interview process.

The transcript was coded by the researcher and given to an outside source to code for reliability and to ensure that the data being reported was authentic. In this case study, the researcher focused on identifying themes developed from the coding process. Themes were reviewed and refined as needed. Identifying themes helped give a voice to the participant (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data analysis ceased at the time of saturation.

Summary

This data collection process provided a systematic way of gathering, organizing, coding, and analyzing information obtained from the interviews. The research design was useful in exploring the challenges of the mother/child relationship and the need for development and improvement of reentry programs for incarcerated mothers in New York State. Conducting a qualitative study helped the researcher report on the experiences of formerly incarcerated mothers. Further, the researcher sought to ignite action for prison reform for incarcerated mothers, their children, caregivers, and communities.

This narrative case study is unique and has the potential of benefiting correction staff and agencies, nurses, families, and communities. This study sought to shed light on the need to develop reentry programs for incarcerated mothers related to separation and transitioning from incarceration to primary caregiver of their children upon release. There are many organizations currently in place, such as the Sentencing Project, Prison Policy Initiative, and the Incarcerated Mothers Law Project taking part in the movement
for prison reform for women and mothers. Incarcerated mothers require assistance with understanding their parental rights and maintaining family ties while separated from their children and post-release. It is the hope of this researcher that this qualitative study will lend support to policy makers, practitioners, correction administrators, communities, foster care agencies, parents, and families for the development of prison programs for incarcerated mothers. Chapter 4 provides the findings of this research.


Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

In the 21st century women are going to prison at an alarming rate. As of 2019 more than 60% of women in state prisons have a child under the age of 18 years old (The Sentencing Project, 2020). Children suffer the most when the incarcerated parent is the mother who is oftentimes the primary caretaker (Ledyard, 2013). The experience of parental incarceration can cause great trauma for a child. The current mass incarceration of mothers perpetuates a serious dilemma. The aim of this study was to offer recommendations for the dual issues faced by incarcerated mothers of maintaining family ties and the role the prison system plays in preparing these women for parenting and reentry.

The stain left behind on the formerly incarcerated continues to haunt the ex-offenders and their families long after an inmate's release. It complicates the reunification process and decreases the likelihood for successful reintegration, as ex-offenders struggle to overcome the stigma associated with incarceration and one's ability to be rehabilitated and lead productive lives. The children and the families of incarcerated mothers are the hidden victims as the dynamics of these families are unique and special considerations need to be put in place as a safety net for the children and families of offending mothers.

Research Questions

1. How do incarcerated mothers describe their experience with parenting during incarceration?
2. What factors do mothers identify as influencing their experience with parenting during incarceration?

3. What role do mothers perceive the correctional facility playing in preparing them to transition from inmate to parent?

4. How do formerly incarcerated mothers describe their experiences with parenting post-incarceration?

**Data Analysis and Findings**

The population consisted of formerly incarcerated mothers who served a minimum of 5 years in prison and had at least one child during the time of their incarceration. This study utilized snowball sampling and it produced four participants. Recruitment took place at laundromats and churches in the tri-state area of New York by flyer distribution. Of the responses received from the flyer, two potential participants were eligible to participate but declined to do so as they were unable to commit the time needed to conduct the interview. The women who were able to participate in the study showed great interest in sharing their stories in hopes of helping other women and influencing reform. All interviews were transcribed through Rev.com

**Sample.** There were four women who expressed interest in participating in the study and were sent informed consent forms. Each woman completed the consent form and was e-mailed the two-question survey to complete prior to the conducting interviews.

**Participant demographics.** To ensure confidentiality, the participants were all assigned pseudonyms prior to the interview transcription. At the time of the interviews, all participants were formerly incarcerated females who served a minimum of 5 years in prison and had at least one child at the time of their incarceration. The ages of the
participants ranged from 38 to 57. All women were New York State residents and served
time in New York State prisons. Of the participants, there was one White woman, one
Latinx woman and two Black women. Three participants described conversing with their
children via telephone and face-to-face visits. One participant mentioned that she had
one face-to-face visit with her children during her incarceration. Communication with
her children following their initial visit was terminated due to the family’s refusal to visit
or except regular phone calls. Table 4.1 provides information about the participants.
Table 4.2 provides information as to the types of communication in which mother and
child engaged.

Table 4.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Time Served</th>
<th>Parenting Programs</th>
<th>Living Situation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>With Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.5 years</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Without Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Without Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Lost Custody</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* The information shown above represents the number of children an incarcerated
mother had during her imprisonment. It also includes the amount of time served, whether
the offender has participated in a parenting program and their current living situation as it
relates to whether they are currently living with their children.

**Themes**

The following themes emerged from the research: survival, emotional support and
support services, self-improvement, trauma, safety and well-being of children, and
motherhood. All four participants mentioned the themes as shown in Table 4.3.
Table 4.2

**Communication**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Face-to-Face</th>
<th>Phone Calls</th>
<th>Letters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 1</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 2</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 3</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 4</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* The communication information gathered gauged the frequency of types of communication between children and incarcerated mothers. Information from the survey highlights the infrequency of engagement and indicates diminishment of attachment.

Table 4.3

**Themes, Categories, and Codes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Survival</td>
<td>Survival</td>
<td>Have no choice, Doing what you have to do, Ability to provide for family, No Hope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Support and Support Services</td>
<td>Support Planning</td>
<td>Support from Family/Spouse, Support from Correctional Agencies, Post-Release Support, Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Housing, employment, parenting programs, availability, accessibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Improvement</td>
<td>Reformation</td>
<td>Getting myself together, Being Tired, Wanting it for yourself, Self-Reliance, Ask for help, Made me a better person and mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal Development</td>
<td>Self-Help, Setting goals, Planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trauma</td>
<td></td>
<td>Haunting, Pain of separation, Fear, Helplessness, Struggle to obtain housing and employment, judgment, frustration, Guilt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hurt, Hard, Struggle, No Help, Pain, Long-lasting, Not what you expected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety and Well-Being of Children</td>
<td></td>
<td>Protection, Children come first, Worry, Spending Quality Time Learning your children, Fostering positive relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motherhood</td>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Good Mother, Taking Care of Children, Being Present, Rules, Structure, Stability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provision</td>
<td>Sugar coating things, Letting them go, Selling drugs, Getting sober, Entering parenting classes, Self-improvement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Survival.** Survival was referenced by all of the participants. Participants offered a variety of scenarios that required them to make decisions that would enable them to survive incarceration and provide for their children while locked up. P1 identified that visitation from her mother/child was a key factor in her ability to serve her time in prison. P1 stated that:

If my mother wouldn't have pulled up there, guess what? I would not have came home. I don't even think I would have made it home. I would've probably caught another charge. I might have killed somebody and never came home.

The desire to be *good mothers* was identified as one of the main reasons for the decisions made by these women. For these participants, the need to establish and/or maintain relationships with their children were an integral part of their survival. P4 reported of her decision to cease communication with her children during her incarceration stating, "I couldn't take no more visits." Ceasing communication allowed P4 to focus on serving her time while blocking out the outside world. It was her belief that in order to do her time she would need to cut off all connections to the outside world. P4 went on to say that ceasing communication "was the hardest part that happened to me; having to block my family out but, I did it in order to save my life."

In addition to developing ways to survive incarceration, the participants discussed their struggle to survive post-incarceration as even more grueling than trying to parent while locked up. P2 stated that although she felt like a mother and was able to maintain contact with her child through visits during incarceration it was not until she came home that the real struggle to survive set in. P2 said:
It was hard. It was very hard. It was extremely hard. I had to figure it out real quick and I didn't have a choice. I wasn't ready for society. And no one in jail helps to prepare you. It was too many people too fast, but I didn't have a choice. I had to just jump back into life again and go get my son. It was scary. It was really scary, but you got to do what you got to do. It made me the strong woman I am today, that's for sure.

Driven by the need to provide for herself and her children P3 went on to describe her ability to cope post-incarceration as "a never-ending struggle." Without receiving the support that she hoped for from her family, P3 discussed her need to sell drugs upon release to be able to provide for her children and the fear that was associated with going back to prison and having her children taken away from her stating "but I needed to eat."

As of 2021, P3 has been out of prison for almost 20 years and continues to suffer from the stigma associated with being an offender. P3 implied:

Everyone still acts exactly the same. I had a really great job now but they asked about my past. Have I ever been arrested within 7 to 10 years? Of course, I said, no because I haven't. They ran my background. Even though I got hired, when the background check came back, they sent me a letter telling me that I couldn't have the job because I was incarcerated. That was 20 years ago. So why can't I have the job? People look into your past to pass judgment. Going to prison never leaves you. I currently live in a hotel/motel because my credit is not great from being incarcerated, trying to pay bills and pay $50,000 in back child support for children that my family was paid to take care of.

The pain was evident as the tears rolled down P3's face. P3 went on to state:
You are on your own. You are the only one you have to worry about and your kids. I keep telling my children, "Don't worry. I'm coming. It may be slow but I'm coming. Don't think I forgot about you. I will never forget about you. I just got to do this to get you where we need to be. You are always in the back of my mind. You are the one driving me. I have to keep telling myself this because I am still trying to survive incarceration.

**Emotional support and support services.** This theme addresses the offenders’ experiences with family and support services offered during incarceration aimed to maintain or increase family engagement for mothers and their children. On a county level, P1 described the vast amount of services offered to mothers in the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. She stressed the facilities goal of maintaining family ties. The idea of family ties is to keep mothers in contact with their families.

The parenting program offered help to facilitate phone calls, visits, the exchange of gifts for holidays and birthdays, and opportunities for the women to read books to their children via audio and send the recorded books home. P1 spoke, almost proud, of the services offered at this facility. She described volunteers who would come to the prison, usually formerly incarcerated women, and create programs for fellowship and that helped mothers strengthen their family ties.

The following statement from P1 really highlights the success of the parenting programs being offered at the Bedford Hills Facility. P1 stated,

There's was always someone in your ear about being there for your kids. Thinking back, I think that's what kept me together. Or just me wanting to be a mother to my daughter or trying to learn how to be one or prepare to be one for her when I
I came home. I was ready to take it all in. I had to get ready. I was preparing for coming home and I knew she was waiting for me. So I was like, I have to try to take all the opportunities I can. So you go to these classes, there's several women that are mothers and the person who's holding the class is an inmate. They are given PowerPoints to go over different topics. They make it fun. They have games, they have movies. We had movie night and on movie night we watch films like “Losing Isaiah” to create discussion about how you would react to various situations as a mother. However, once I was transferred to an upstate prison all of the parenting programs stopped because there weren’t any programs available.

P2 and P3 also described being in prisons that had no parenting programs available for mothers. P2 who served time at a federal prison referred to her experience in prison as work, work, work. It was the policy of the facility that everyone had a job, although women were offered weekly weekend visits with their family. P2 described her experiences with visitation as rather pleasant. Visitation was said to be very lax as mothers had the ability to play with their children, read, feed them, and spend time together. P2 described her experience stating,

In the visiting room there were no bars, so when my son came to see me I was able to hang out with him in the visiting room. They had vending machines. It was pretty laid back. We could watch TV. We were able to pop popcorn and hang out with the kids. We could walk around. We can go sit in the grass. We can go sit on the rocks. We could take pictures. There was a lot more to do when the kids came up to visit, not just sit in the visiting room. If the weather was nice, we
were able to go outside and sit at picnic tables or stuff like that. However, there was a clear understanding that you were not able to take anything tangible from your family.

P3 spoke of the lack of parenting programs within the facility where she served time. However, P3 had no contact with her family and only received one visit during her incarceration. P1, P2, and P4 all described the vast amount of support received from their family during their entire incarceration. Each participant described how vital being able to correspond with their family was and how it made the time being served more bearable.

Surprisingly, P4 offered testimony of the positive experience that she had while serving time in an upstate correction facility referencing a parenting program called “STEP.” This program is said to teach mothers parenting skills. At the end of the program mothers receive a certificate of completion which looks favorable to the judge, especially for women who have lost custody of their children. Sadly, P4 went on to say, The program is not advertised or mentioned during the intake process, women sort of stumble upon it. The class is free. If you ask to join, you are assigned a counselor. They ask you questions about yourself and your children and then they enroll you. Now, once you go into STEP, you need to complete STEP until it's your turn to be released either home or to a program. You can't just go in one week and then you want to come out the next week, because that is not going to look good on the record. In this program women were given handouts with important information about safety. The classes taught techniques of how to deal with your anger and make good decisions.
The two participants who had the opportunity to attend parenting classes spoke of the benefits these classes had in their lives. However, all participants expressed the importance of family support to maintain a relationship with their children and to ease the burden associated with incarceration and family separation. Unfortunately, P3 was unable to receive the family support she felt that she needed and as a result expressed the suffering that it caused during and post-incarceration on her relationship with her children.

Additionally, keeping the lines of communication open during incarceration was another necessity highlighted by the participants. Staying connected provided women the opportunity to continue to feel like mothers and in most instances, served as a positive when trying to serve time.

When discussing her experiences with maintaining contact with her family during incarceration, P1 referred back to her time spent in the Bedford Hills County facility. As it related to her time spent at this facility she stated:

You have a counselor and every 3 months you go, you sit up there with your counselor and every 3 months I always made phone calls. I would sit there and talk to my mom for a long time, longer than the 30 minutes calls that you have to pay for. When you can't call your family it’s hard on these women. That's why they come up with these programs. They help, it really helps. As incarcerated women, we're emotional, especially when it comes to our kids, and when you have to do time, it puts you in a whole other mental space and you have to fight for your sanity. Having that communication makes holding onto your sanity a little easier.
**Self-improvement.** All participants were able to identify with the benefits of self-improvement. Self-improvement would be considered improving yourself by your own efforts. The results that emerged from the participants were the benefits of having gone to prison and how it aided in enriching their lives and the lives of their families. During the interviews, participants expressed a desire to be better people and better mothers. Several participants shared compelling experiences of how they dealt with improving oneself within the prison system. P1 refers to her experience with incarceration stating:

Prison was horrible. Horrible. But it was something that I needed. I needed it. It made me better. It made me better, like stronger. The experience overall was something that I will never forget. It helped me a lot. It helped me find myself. It helped me prepare to be the kind of person I thought I needed to be. It helped me to stop getting high and it made me focus on being a better mother for my daughter. It was hard. It was horrible. Then, to see myself flourish into a solid-ass female; I'm sad that it took me to go to prison to get right, but whatever. I'm not even mad. I thank God every day for that 9 years. Yes, it hurt me and my daughter's relationship but it saved my life. I wouldn't be able to do this right now without that experience and the things I have now are not much but their mine and that feels good.

The women expressed that the obstacles they had to go through caused them to stand strong and deal with each situation as it comes. P1 further went on to state:

You got to change your heart. You definitely have to change your heart because I was angry. I knew that I needed some help. And when I saw that I was getting the
help that I needed, it made me realize all I needed was an extra push because I
didn't think I could get clean by myself for the longest time. You know how hard
it was? I didn't even think I could do it. So, if you're on drugs, you got to get
cleaned up. Know your triggers and know when today is not a good day. I
wanted my daughter. I came home and I fought. I knew what I wanted to do. I
had to do it. I was scared. Because I didn't know how. I didn't know how I was
going to pull it together. I'm still not sure how it came together but it did and I'm
proud of myself.

Similarly, P2 reflected on her experiences and the influence that prison had on her
decision making post-incarceration. P2 declared:

I think my experience as an inmate made me a better person. The person I am
today. I think the experience in itself taught me a lot. It taught me a lot about life.
It taught me a lot about knowing I could live without so much, living under one
roof with so many women and surviving. Prison forces you to walk a straight line
and you can't get off that straight line. You have to walk one foot in front of
another, because if you walk off that line, you're going to fall. So from walking
that straight line for so long and not falling, you learn to live by that code in life.
The experience helped me to learn to check yourself every step of the way so you
don't fall. It made me stronger. It didn't prepare me for parenting but it did make
me better as a person.

These women openly expressed their belief that prison was the best thing for them at that
time in their lives. Each woman spoke of her individual struggles with drug use, selling
drugs, crime and fraud. Furthermore, P3 reports of her experience with self-improvement as follows:

You have to have faith in yourself. You have to believe in yourself and know you can do it. You have to want it for you. You have to say, "I need to have different people, places, and things.” You sometimes have to eliminate old friends and family alike to succeed. You have to be a friend to yourself and hold onto you and God. Don't get discouraged. No matter what happens, anything in this life that's for you is going to be yours. Be the best you, you can be. Be the best you, you knew you could be and always have faith and confidence in yourself because if you have faith and confidence in yourself, others have faith and confidence in you. Do whatever you need to do. Seek out any available online courses to help you and the relationship with your children. You have to do anything necessary. If I knew then what I know now, I would absolutely do everything that I can do to build my education while incarcerated. You have to do that because what I found is that education is key. The overall experience made me better and I know for sure that I am never going back.

From the perspective of P4:

Prison made me a better person. It made me a better mother. It helped me to understand the type of person that I did not want to be and the type of person that I wanted my children to be proud of. After 15 years of being home, I relapsed and gave into my drug addiction however, I was diagnosed with lung cancer and was immediately taken back to my days of being incarcerated. I was drawn back to things that made me want to get clean and be a better person and mother in the
first place. As of 2021, I have been drug free for 3 years and my cancer is in remission. Going to jail sucked but I needed it. I was being severely abused during my marriage to my kids’ father. Almost on a daily basis. Going to prison also helped me to get away from him; to break free and learn who I was as a person and not just as a mother, a wife, or a punching bag. Jail provided me with the opportunity to get out, get help, and grow.

**Trauma.** The issue of trauma arose as women discussed the stigma, heartbreak, and the self-loathing associated with being an incarcerated mother. Participants spoke of the living conditions within the prisons as filthy and emphasized the severity of the stench. P3 went on to state this:

> There is no hope for anyone within the prison system. The only hope and faith you can have is in yourself because there is no one around to help you. You have to want it for yourself or the pain from incarceration and people’s assumptions of you being an unfit mother can kill you. I remember being in the visiting room after the one visit I was afforded and I could feel the silence of the women after visitation was over and the pain associated with watching your children leave without you. The sounds of the women screaming and crying as they were taken back to their cells and the feelings of guilt knowing that everything your child is experiencing is because of you. Even so many years after my release I am still haunted by my incarceration. Family still judges you and treats you funny. Jobs still check your background and hold your incarceration against you even after 20 years. To date, I still don't have custody of my children and I can't shake the pain
from the decisions that I made in the past and how it has negatively affected my entire life.

P4 discussed the trauma of her incarceration and testified:

I told my husband, "You know what, don't really bring them up here anymore," because visitation, when he brought them, was a heartbreaker. You have a good visit, but then when it's time for them to go, that didn't feel good on my end or their end, because it was like, "Why's mommy not coming with us?" I felt so bad. When they left for visits, when I went back to my cell, I didn't feel good at all. I was glad to see them, you know like, I've seen my kids. But, on the other hand, I felt so bad. I felt lonely, and I was just disgusted with myself. I was mad at myself and hated myself for using drugs and causing my children this hurt. I also didn't want them to be in a place where the conditions were so bad. Prison stinks. Literally. That smell, when you walk in, I can't even describe the smell. You don't want that smell. And, guess what? You smell like that smell. You can take as many showers as you want to. You've got that smell on you. It stinks. It's dirty. It's nasty. I didn't want that smell on my children. So not only are you traumatized by life's circumstances, you are further traumatized by the conditions in which you are forced to live.

Although P2 stressed that prison was not a desirable experience outside of the fact that it made her a stronger person, however, she did not describe her experience as traumatic. P2 believed that having served time in a federal facility as opposed to doing state time was more lax with less restrictions overall. P2 stated: “Women were allowed to walk around and communicate with each other.” They had recreational time and time to spend
in the library. P2 further believed that this flexibility made serving time much easier, however, it did not prepare her for parenting during or post-incarceration. P2 further stated: “I had to figure all of that out on my own. I had to pull myself up by my own boot straps.” P1 communicated that the most traumatic experiences that she had while incarcerated were trying to get and stay clean, feelings of self-hate for her life decisions, and constant worrying about not being there for her daughter. She mentioned a specific instance stating:

I remember one time I didn't hear from my mom for like 2 or 3 months. I wrote her and she didn't write back. Well, she didn't write me back as fast as I thought she should have. I immediately thought something was wrong. Just going through that little thing, I was in there going crazy and as much as I hurt and as scared as I was there was absolutely nothing that I could do about it. Feeling helpless was devastating. So, I can't even imagine how it feels for the women that have no communication with their families. When you first get to prison you go through what they call the intake process where they obtain information about you. Never do they ask, do you have children? Do you feel your children are safe? Are you scared about your children's well-being. It's like they don't care if women have children or not. I think the trauma begins there. It's like your almost forced to forget about your children once you are incarcerated. (P1)

**Motherhood.** Although incarcerated, these women still considered themselves to be good mothers. Participants spoke of other incarcerated women who they felt were unfit mothers or women who did not acknowledge they had children at all and clearly disassociated themselves from those women. Despite incarceration, participants
expressed their desire to stay connected to their children and to their maternal identity. For years, the media has portrayed good mothers to be women who are able to care for her children, her husband, take care of the household and provide for her family against all odds. Whether a stay-at-home mom like Carol Brady or a working-class mother like Clare Huxtable, televised images of good mothers have it all together, all the time.

In their own way, each mother who participated in this study referred to what she believed to be a good mother. P4 spoke of her decision to say goodbye to her children during her incarceration for her mental well-being and that of her children. Further, she left her children under the care of the man she described as an abusive husband but a good father. Making these decisions was P4’s display of being her version of a good mother. She knew that she could not offer her children what their father could at that time and despite their unhealthy relationship, “he was a good father and I wouldn’t take that away from him or from my kids” (P4).

Their perception of being a good mother is what led many of these women to prison. Driven by the need to feed and clothe her family, P3 discussed her decision to sell drugs to provide for her children financially, pre and post incarceration. She spoke of her relationship struggles and her lack of family support, finding drug sales to be the quickest means of generating money to feed her family. In this way, P3 believed that she was being a good mother by doing whatever it took to provide for her children.

P1 and P2 spoke of the power of visitation and the benefits that it had on allowing them to hold onto their maternal identity in a tangible way, during incarceration. In this way, these mothers were able to spend time with their children and nurture them. P1 further discussed her experiences with tele-visits, exchanging Christmas/birthday gifts
and creating audio books as a means of staying connecting to her daughter and fulfilling her role of being a good mother. All participants held on to the notion that the well-being of their children was the important thing, and they would do whatever needed to be done to make sure that their children were cared for.

Regardless of their intentions being an incarcerated mother had a long list of painful consequences. Each participant referred to times of their children’s lives that they missed out on. One participant described being away from her children as one of the worst experiences of her life. When speaking of the pain associated with being an incarcerated mother these women used words like heart ache, struggle, pain, shame, and guilt to describe their experiences.

It was not until P1 was released from prison that she began to understand the pain associated with being away from her daughter for so long since she gave birth while incarcerated. P1 had to build a relationship with her daughter. They did not know each other. It has been over a decade and the relationship is still not strong. This is not from a lack of P1 trying to open the doors of communication. However, her daughter is not interested in being parented by someone that she doesn’t know. P1 spoke of the hurt and guilt that she experienced daily because of the strained relationship with her daughter. At the time of this study, her daughter had run away, and she had no idea where she was staying. P1 was able to see her daughter periodically by looking at her social media pages via friends’ posts.

The information provided by these women sheds new light on the challenges of parenting in unconventional situations. These testimonies take motherhood past the idea of televised images of spending quality time with your children and doing homework and
exposes the basic needs of survival, offering new narratives for the meaning of a good mother. Table 4.4 reviews family and relationship status by participant.

Table 4.4

**Motherhood**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Family Status Pre-Incarceration</th>
<th>Relationship Status Pre-Incarceration</th>
<th>Reunification Post-Release</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Participant 1</td>
<td>Pregnant</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 2</td>
<td>Living with Children</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 3</td>
<td>Living with Children</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 4</td>
<td>Living with Children</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* The data shown above represents the family dynamic of formerly incarcerated mothers prior to their imprisonment and whether they were able to reunify with their children post-release.

**Safety and well-being of children.** The findings suggest that incarcerated mothers continue to express the need to protect their children while in prison. All participants expressed their desire to protect their children. P1 described her experiences with visitation stating:

I welcomed my daughter coming to visit because I knew it was safe and she would feel comfortable in her surroundings. They're real big on making the children feel comfortable. It does not look like a jail. You don't have to be scared to bring your kids on a visit. It's okay. If my mother wouldn't have brought my daughter up there . . . I would not have come home. I would have died. It hurts that when I came home from jail my daughter rejected me. As much as I tried to be with her and be there for her she rejected me. The baby just rejected me every time.
The participant takes a moment to catch her breath and take a sip of water as her eyes began to swell with tears. P1 proceeded stating:

> But I'm not going to blame that on me being locked up because that's bullshit. I tried to be there for my daughter. I can’t tell you how much, "I needed her love," but she didn't need or want mine. She rejected me because I wasn't my mother. I was not going to let her walk over me. She didn't know who I was as a person. And she couldn't understand that I wasn't my mother. And that's just where we didn't click. My daughter was getting away with all kinds of stuff while I was away. She ran the house. And when I came home, I was like absolutely not, that was a problem. That was a problem. I was trying to protect her. She was getting in trouble in school. I found porn videos in her room that she was stealing from my mom. I tried to create some kind of structure but she wasn’t having it. To date, I do not have her nor do I know where she is. She ran away a couple of times. I found her and brought her back and she ran away again. We placed her in a group home and she ran away from there. The last I heard she was staying back and forth with different friends. I guess, had I not gone to prison I would have been around and maybe our relationship would be different. You can’t fault me for trying to protect my baby the best way I knew how.

With the exception of P3, all of the participants expressed positive relationships with the caregivers of their children which helped to ease some of the worry associated with trying to protect their children remotely. Surprisingly, P4 stated that leaving her children with her abusive husband was the best thing for them. P4 implied:
My husband was abusive. Very abusive. My children’s father used to abuse me. I kind of got tired. The only way I knew how to medicate was to get high. I'm not using that as an excuse, but it helped me to get high faster. I mean, just constantly getting hit. He had a bad addiction to numbers, so I guess when he would lose, that's when I got my beatings. I got tired of fighting, and he was an ex-professional boxer. I never told my kids that I was abused. Certain things you just don't tell kids. I never stopped them from loving him or him taking care of his kids. I was always with that. To this day, I'm glad I did, because you're not supposed to tell a kid, "Oh, your father hit me," your father did this, your father did that. I didn't do that to them. I was grateful, even through all of what I went through with him. I'm glad he was there, because a lot of fathers aren't. He really was there. That was a blessing by itself. I didn’t fear for my children’s safety because he was the best father, just a horrible husband. So, as crazy as it sounds leaving my children with their father was the best thing for them and for my sanity. I hated him, but all the kids knew, he was a good father. I wouldn't have wanted it any other way. I was one of the lucky ones that had that background help. My husband made things very easy for me. Very easy, whatever it was, no matter where he had to go and how many hoops he had to jump through, he did it. I wouldn't trade my babies' daddy for nothing. He might not have been shit to me, but when it came to them kids, he was all about them kids. So, I was grateful.

When I came home it was a swift transition. We were getting a divorce but finally starting to become somewhat friends, at least for the kids. I got a place to live and he gave me no problem when I came for my children. They are grown
now but from the time I got them back I never left their side. That’s what I call a
good mother, keeping your children safe.

P2’s experiences with keeping her child safe and worrying about his well-being
came post-release. In order to hide the pain and the struggle of trying to take over as a
parent who was unprepared, P2 said:

Basically, I sugarcoated everything. I didn't allow him to see me break down
when I was breaking down because I couldn't get my life together. I couldn't
figure things out so quick. I wasn't ready for him per se. I needed to figure my
way out. I wasn't ready for society. It was too many people too fast, but I didn't
have a choice. I had to just jump back into life again and go get my son. But I
knew one thing for sure he was going to be well taken care of, if it was the last
ting that I did.

Unfortunately, P3 really struggled with her feelings of not being able to keep her
children safe or knowing of their well-being. She always believed that her children were
not experiencing physical harm because they were left with her mother however, she was
concerned about their well-being. P3 described her experiences as follows:

My family, they live in public housing and were using my children for money.
They poisoned my children with negative stories about me, most of the time lies,
so my kids would not want to come with me when I tried to get them. This is one
of the things I mean when I say I was concerned about their well-being. They
were being poisoned, for money. When I came home my family could have put
me on their lease so I could be eligible for housing but they wouldn’t. So not only
was I concerned for my children while I was in jail, I couldn't protect them now
that I was home. Going to jail ruined my life and I ruined the life of my children at the same time.

**Summary of Results**

This qualitative case study was used to gain knowledge from the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated mothers and the role the prison system played in their ability to parent during and post-incarceration. Six themes emerged from the interviews. The themes are survival, emotion and support services, self-improvement, trauma, safety, and well-being of children and motherhood. The answers to the research questions identified that for the participants being what they perceived as a good mother for their children was most important regardless of their opportunity to engage in parenting programs while incarcerated. Chapter 5 will provide the implications of the research and recommendations for the future.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated mothers taking over as primary caregivers of their children post-incarceration. Further, the objective was to highlight the stories of these women who served time in a New York State prison to identify factors that contributed to their transition from inmate to parent and their experiences with parenting programs and reunification.

The data identified that despite previous research on the benefits of parenting programs for incarcerated mothers and families (Cox, 2009; Gilad & Gat, 2013) the key factor mentioned by participants was access to visitation. A mother’s ability to stay connected to her children face-to-face has shown to be invaluable to an incarcerated mothers’ ability to survive her sentencing and to continue to establish her role as a mother while imprisoned. The inability to speak with or see their children was identified as being a contributing factor to incarcerated mothers’ level of stress, anxiety, and trauma.

This study was a qualitative case study of the mother/child relationship and their experiences with parenting programs. This study further investigated ways in which the separation of incarceration affected the mother/child relationship. The research detailed the lack of available parenting programs in New York State prisons and revealed the impact not having access to these programs had on the women's level of preparedness for
parenting post-incarceration. This study suggests that incarcerated mothers require additional support services. This study illuminates the factor that kept each participant grounded was their desire to be good mothers to their children. An interpretation of the data suggests that emotional support from family and support services from the correctional agencies influence a mother’s ability or inability to communicate with their children and establish their roles as a mother.

In accordance with current results, previous studies have demonstrated the importance of visitation (Bloom, 2014; Kasiborski, 2014; Robison, 2014; Wilson, 2010). It has been suggested that mothers be relocated to institutions closer to their homes to foster visitation and strengthen family bonds. Inquiring into the lived experiences of incarcerated mothers revealed barriers and offered suggestions on ways to enhance a mother’s ability to stay connected to their families and enhance their level of preparedness to parent post-incarceration. However, the findings of this study did not support the previous research as it relates to the benefits of parenting programs. This contradictory result may be due to the women having had no access to parenting programs while incarcerated in state facilities.

Menting et al. (2014) conducted a study which recognized the importance of intervention timing and suggested that mothers should have access to parental programs during incarceration when it is easiest to reach these women. The study advocates that parenting classes should address the issues faced by incarcerated mothers, such as education, mental health, stress, and recidivism. Menting et al. (2014) goes on to state that home visits would be useful for mothers to practice parenting skills and problem-solving pre-release.
The findings from the Menting et al. (2014) study is supported by the interpretation of the data in this study. All of the participants identified that having had the opportunity to participate in a parenting program would have made their transition from inmate to primary caretaker less complicated. The findings of this study offer insight to the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated women and the challenges faced when taking over as primary caregiver post-incarceration.

Research on female offenders has skyrocketed over the last few decades as the female prison population continues to rise. Research continues to emerge on the impact that incarceration has on parenting. Participants expressed that while serving time, maintaining contact with their children was the most challenging task. Participants spoke of prison regulations, prison locations, and the cost of phone calls as challenges to communication. One participant spoke of a strained relationship with her child's caregiver which created additional challenges with maintaining relationships with her children.

Some mothers noted that they were able to maintain contact with their children via mail by writing them, and sending cards and books for holidays. Participants stressed that frequent visitation and use of telephone calls served as helpful ways to maintain connection with their children during incarceration. Visitation and telephone calls were said to assist in maintaining a sense of normalcy, allowing these mothers to be involved in their children's lives, which in turn lessens the impact of separation. With rebuilding the relationships with their children in mind, incarcerated mothers require additional services while imprisoned, to achieve their goals of staying connected.
Whether it is becoming educated, getting sober, or getting a job, these mothers state that all of their decisions while incarcerated focused on restoring their relationships with their children. The more these women were able to maintain some sense of normalcy and the more they were involved in their children’s lives, the lesser the impact of separation. With the primary goal of rebuilding relationships with their children, incarcerated mothers need programs that will help to accomplish this. Based on the data from this study, The Bedford Hills Correctional facility's Hour Children program has shown itself to be the most beneficial parenting program received by the mothers interviewed. It has proven itself to be one of the few jails in New York State that addresses some of the major challenges associated with parenting as a mother while incarcerated.

Serving as a source of support, The Hour Children program seemed to play a significant part in the family reunification process. P1 described the program as offering a variety of services that helped mothers maintain family ties and was a beacon of light in the dark forest that is incarceration. According to the participant who spent time at this facility, the parenting programs were very beneficial, life changing even. It was stated that the parenting programs highlighted the importance of a mother's involvement in her child's life. The Hour Children program taught transitional skills that included decision making, exercising patience, and noticing your triggers.

Incarceration creates major barriers to parenting from prison that specifically affects women. Most incarcerated mothers are housed over 100 miles from their homes. This makes visitation more challenging and expensive. Many families cannot afford to travel such distances. Prisons oftentimes are not family friendly which in turn can make
some family members reluctant to travel for visits and/or bring children to such harsh environments. Incarcerated mothers are in serious need for assistance as the children of these women suffer the most from their absence.

The research questions for this study were:

1. How do formerly incarcerated mothers describe their experience with parenting during incarceration?

2. What factors do mothers identify as influencing their experience with parenting during incarceration?

3. What role do mothers perceive the correctional facility playing in preparing them to transition from inmate to parent?

4. How do formerly incarcerated mothers describe their experiences with parenting post-incarceration?

Implications of Findings

Incarcerated mothers remain a reviled group, and their children and families are largely invisible. Greater assistance is needed to help these women achieve their goal of reunification. All participants expressed their desire to have had the opportunity to participate in a parenting program during their incarceration. Further, all the mothers agreed that visitation is the most important form of connection a mother can have with her child during incarceration. It has been said that this form of communication allows these women to continue to feel like mothers and establish their roles in preparation for reunification.

This research project sought to address the social and personal circumstances that ex-offending mothers experience during and post-incarceration. Additionally, the
researcher sought to explore how ex-offending mothers were able to adapt and their experiences with parenting programs during and post-incarceration.

**Finding 1.** Financial services should be considered when placing offending mothers in remote facilities. This population needs access and equity to affordable housing.

**Finding 2.** Access to visitation has been identified as a direct influence on an incarcerated mother’s ability to parent while imprisoned. Additionally, the benefits of visitation in an environment that does not resemble a prison was identified as a key factor in an incarcerated mothers’ ability to parent in a manner that decreases the likelihood of visitation being a traumatic experience for the child.

**Finding 3.** Correctional agencies and medical staff should come together to develop programs geared to assist mothers with self-care. Participants identified the range of mental health services available but refer to the lack of services available for women who want to improve but do not suffer from mental health issues; women that just need a helping hand; women who want to learn how to help themselves.

**Finding 4.** Social support services are needed for the families of these women to better assist them in handling challenges associated with being the caregiver of children while their mother is incarcerated. Further, these support services are needed for mothers while incarcerated. This will allow these women to receive peer support and learn from each other despite limited access to parenting programs.

These findings display the disconnect between the needs of mothers and families and the goal of the prison system to secure and rehabilitate inmates. This information can be used to develop programs aimed at increasing family engagement with the primary
goal of reunification. Developing new programs to help these mothers and their families will assist in lessening the detrimental effects that the separation of incarceration has on the mother/child relationship. There seems to be a direct correlation between visitation and an incarcerated mother’s ability to swiftly transition her role from inmate to parent post-release. There is a definite need to improve access to visitation and create family safe, child-friendly environments that will allow mothers/children to bond and establish relationships during the mothers’ incarceration. A feasible approach to handling this issue could be to adopt the suggestions of formerly incarcerated mothers across all levels of the social ecological model.

At the interpersonal level, described by a participant as the intake process, identifying whether or not a woman has children is the starting point. There should be documentation provided to these women and their families that direct them to available support services. At the community level, support services should be implemented for families of incarcerated mothers to assist with the challenges faced during the mother’s imprisonment. At the institutional level, organizations can create assistance programs to help caregivers receive necessary resources. At the policy level, policies should be developed that mandate support services for incarcerated mothers and their families which can aid in increasing reunification and reducing recidivism. The data from this study offers a wide array of insight about parenting during incarceration. The information provided by these women offers insight about their journey to bettering themselves during incarceration with the goal of reunification at the forefront.

As interviews shed light on the benefits and areas of concerns with available parenting programs, it is the hope of this researcher that these findings can jumpstart and
encourage the development of programs tailored for the needs of these women and their families during and post-incarceration.

The development of parent support programs and community support programs can serve to strengthen parenting abilities and allow parents and caregivers to develop new skills needed to foster healthy family relationships. Bronfenbrenner (1979) mentioned that parenting skills are developed by informal and formal support systems. Parenting programs reinstate, reinforce and enhance a mother’s identity. The primary goal of support programs should be to provide information that help parents become more knowledgeable as it relates to the development of their children. Further, these programs should include home visits, outreach, and activities to engage the community and encourage support of these women and their families. Support programs can have a positive effect on the family relationship and aid in lessening the burden associated with social and emotional development, finances, healthcare, and keeping the family together.

Women often experience shame from the stigma associated with being incarcerated women. To some this automatically means that you are an unfit mother or that they have done something wrong. Oftentimes these women suffer in silence due to the shame that comes from talking about their experiences. Mothers who have a record experience judgment, lose family members, job opportunities, housing, and it can lead to loss of custody. The participants in this study would probably be considered unfit mothers however, this is not the way they perceived themselves. Regardless of whether a decision was good or bad, these women always prioritized the needs of their children. This is what they would consider to be attributes of a good mother.
Limitations

The generalizability of these results is subject to limitations. The recruitment of formerly incarcerated mothers proved challenging in the midst of a pandemic. Further, the research had to be conducted remotely making communicating with the participants more difficult due to technical issues and the absence of a more relaxing and inviting setting. There were a limited number of formerly incarcerated women who had served a minimum of 5 years in prison and had children at the time of their incarceration. Even though a small sample is sufficient in qualitative research, the participants in the samples age ranged between 38 and 55 years old.

Recommendations

This research and future research can serve to build the knowledge base for working with incarcerated mothers, formerly incarcerated mothers, children of incarcerated mothers, and all stakeholders who are impacted by the incarceration of a mother. This case study demonstrated that mothers have crucial experiences during incarceration. Implications for future research includes the need for programs regarding strategies to help mothers/children stay engaged during incarceration and how to support these women post-release. Although the study lends itself to the body of correctional knowledge, further studies should be developed to gain a thorough understanding of the experiences of incarcerated mothers.

Gaining a better understanding of the challenges of mothering during incarceration was realized with this study. This research study can add to the dearth of available information to increase involvement with this population. Studies can be conducted to analyze the significance of current programs offered in prison for parenting
and for life skills. Tracking long term effects of these programs on reunification could offer insight into the importance of this information.

Given their success, correctional institutions should make it a national standard to follow in the footsteps of the Bedford Hills facility and implement programs that promote strengthening the family relationship during incarceration. The Bedford Hills Hour Children program should be used as a model for program development as it is meeting the ever-changing human needs of these women and their families. The Hour Children program has tapped into the power of family engagement, maintaining family ties and sound decision making. This program is using its services to help enhance the competency of mothers and how they care for their children. Further, there are online parenting programs that can be sought out by incarcerated mothers during and post-incarceration that will assist in providing resources. These programs have developed curriculums geared towards strengthening the family dynamic through strategic thinking, planning, and skill development such as Parenting Inside Out, Online Parenting Program and Pathfinder network.

For many of the participants in this study, participating in a parenting program was nearly impossible in state facilities. Some participants cited that the institution where they served time had no parenting programs available for mothers and their families. These programs should be designed to meet the needs of these women. Corrections officials must take responsibility for the implementation of more programs that promote maintaining family ties during incarceration. Further, participants in this study mention the need for correctional agencies to develop questions to be asked during
the intake process geared towards keeping families together; questions that inquire about children and their safety and well-being.

Current policies regarding the use of parenting programs should be updated to better meet the needs of the incarcerated mother. While there are policies to address the needs of incarcerated mothers, this study can further inform policy makers about their distinct needs. In an effort to create a fairer justice system the First Step Act was designed to address incarcerated individuals, their families, and public safety on a federal level. This bill aims to fund rehabilitation programs, reducing prison sentencing, increase the possibility of home confinement and dignity for women. This bill is a major step in the right direction for reform however, the program's policies are not intended for all inmates.

Following in its footsteps, New Jersey State Senator Cory Booker is developing legislation entitled the Next Step Act. This act takes the First bill a step further by addressing an inmates need for working papers and proper identification upon release. The act intends to enforce the “Ban the Box” rule preventing employers from asking applicants about their criminal background unless it is applicable to the position being applied for (Next Step Act, 2019). Further, the act aims to reduce mandatory sentencing for non-violent drug offenses. This will help many incarcerated mothers come home sooner thus, keeping the family in sync and allowing them more time to rebuild their relationships. The bill should continue by including universal healthcare so these women and their families can receive affordable healthcare and services geared to address their needs such as mental health services, childcare, support programs, and individual and family counseling.
The Next Step Act will assist incarcerated women in gaining employment upon release and aid in decreasing some of the stigma associated with being an ex-offender. Employment looks favorable in the eyes of probation. It further allows these women to be eligible for housing and provide for their families. Participants in this study refer to their struggles with obtaining employment decades after release from prison and the obstacles that it creates for them and their families. The Next Step Act can assist in alleviating some of the stress that these mothers experience trying to provide for their family post-incarceration.

Officials should take an active role in developing programs that address the needs of incarcerated mothers and consider the damage that incarceration has on children and families. Missing are the voices of formerly incarcerated mothers when developing programs and policies. These women are the story tellers who can lend their insights to bring about change and correction with penal policies and procedures.

Future research should conducted in the form of a qualitative comparative study to explore the experiences of formerly incarcerated fathers to examine the similarities, differences, and the potential of implementing transitional programs and support services. Future, a more comprehensive study would include younger participants in addition to seasoned participants to evaluate any progress within the correctional system.

**Conclusion**

The growth in the female prison population affects a large number of families. Incarcerated mothers face a number of challenges during and post-incarceration. Mothers are obligated to find ways to cope with the challenges of imprisonment in order to survive incarceration. This study suggests that, regardless of the issues faced while
incarcerated, the goal for these women was to be better mothers for their children post-release. Their desire to be better was a driving factor behind their personal development efforts.

The purpose of this research was to gain insight into the experiences of motherhood and parenting programs for incarcerated mothers. This study has contributed to enhancing the knowledge of the experience of mothering during incarceration. Research has been conducted related to incarcerated mothers drug use, mental health concerns, and crimes committed, but little research has been done specific to the benefits of parenting programs on reunification.

This qualitative study explored what incarcerated mothers describe as their experience. These women are the experts of their incarceration experience and should be used as the advisers in the development of programs and policies. Considering the number of people who suffer from the incarceration of a mother, policy makers should consider using the experiences of these formerly incarcerated women to influence change.

This research allows formerly incarcerated mothers a chance to tell their stories. These findings give researchers, correctional officials, and policy makers insight to further research and develop new programs and policies for this population. The findings of this study can offer suggestions for the development of programs based on the stories and experiences of these women. In addition to adding to the body of literature, this study can help improve family engagement and reunification for mothers, children, and their families during and post-incarceration of a mother, who is oftentimes the primary caregiver.
References


Temple, A. (2012). *Evaluation of parent-child interaction therapy and a standard parenting program within a women’s state prison facility* (Doctoral dissertation,
West Virginia University). Retrieved from https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/etd/4929/


Appendix A

IRB Approval Letter

February 18, 2021

File No: 4155-021821-01

Jimmell Gorley
St. John Fisher College

Dear Mr. Gorley:

Thank you for submitting your research proposal to the Institutional Review Board.

I am pleased to inform you that the Board has approved your Expedited Review project, “Family Engagement: Challenges of the Mother-Child Relationship Post-Incarceration.”

Please note, to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and to help mitigate community transmission, St. John Fisher College has temporarily suspended all in-person activities (recruitment and data collection) among researchers and study participants for all IRB-approved human subjects research until further notice. Studies that do not involve any direct subject contact, e.g., pre-existing records, electronic surveys, tele-research, and remote interaction via device/app/software are still permissible, along with data analysis from previously collected in-person sessions. The St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board (IRB) is continuing to review submitted proposals. Researchers who opt to adjust their recruitment and/or data collection methods need to submit a Project Continuation or Modification Form that describes proposed changes and includes updated consent forms, flyers, etc.

Should you have any questions about this process or your responsibilities, please contact me at irb@sjfc.edu.

Sincerely,

Eileen Lynd-Balta
Eileen Lynd-Balta, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board
Appendix B

Recruitment Flyer

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN INCARCERATED?

ARE YOU A MOTHER?

WANT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY?

PLEASE SIGN UP TO BE INTERVIEWED FOR AN ANONYMOUS RESEARCH STUDY!!!

HELP CHANGE THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM!

"INTERVIEWS WILL LAST BETWEEN 60 TO 90 MINUTES"
"NO COMPENSATION WILL BE OFFERED FOR PARTICIPATION"

CONTACT INFORMATION:

JIMMELL GORLEY
DOCTORAL CANDIDATE
@ ST. JOHN FISHER COLLEGE
(914)-469-3157 (PH)
EMAIL: GORLEYJIMMELL@GMAIL.COM

IT'S YOUR TIME TO SHINE!!!

'Help other incarcerated mothers?
'Help children of incarcerated mothers!

TELL YOUR STORY!!!

'Help create change for incarcerated mothers!
'Help caregivers for children of incarcerated mothers!

LET YOUR VOICE BE HEARD!!!
Appendix C

Informed Consent

St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board

Statement of Informed Consent for Adult Participants

Family Engagement: Challenges of the Mother/Child Relationship Post-Incarceration

SUMMARY OF KEY INFORMATION:

- You are being asked to be in a research study of formerly incarcerated mothers. As with all research studies, participation is voluntary.
- The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences of women taking over as primary caregivers' of their children post-incarceration. This study seeks to explore the thoughts of post incarcerated women, their perceptions and experiences with reentry and parenting programs.
- Approximately 3 to 5 people will take part in this study. The results will be used for doctoral completion and to encourage change within the justice system for incarcerated mothers and their families.
- If you agree to take part in this study, you will be involved in this study for Your participation will involve one interview, approximately 60 to 90 minutes in length. You may be contacted if clarification is needed after the initial interview. This study should be complete within three months.
- The interview will be conducted at a location of your choosing or via online platform (i.e. zoom).
- We believe this study has no more than minimal risk. There is a possibility that you will experience discomfort or become emotional as a result of discussing personal information. The principal investigator will be present if any of these risks arise and advise the participant to contact their healthcare provider.
• You may not directly benefit from this research; however, we hope that your participation in the study may influence change within the criminal justice system for incarcerated mothers and their families.

DETAILED STUDY INFORMATION (some information may be repeated from the summary above):

You are being asked to be in a research study of the challenges of the mother/child relationship post-incarceration. This study is being conducted at a location of the participants choosing. The study is being conducted by the Principal Investigator, Jimmell Gorley. The dissertation chair is Dr. Janice Kelly at St. John Fisher College Ed.D program.

You were selected as a possible participant because you have been identified as someone who has experience challenges with the mother/child relationship post-incarceration.

Please read this consent form and ask any questions you have before agreeing to be in the study.

PROCEDURES:

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following: You will be asked to participate in one 60 to 90-minute interview at a location of your choosing. During the interview you will be asked a series of questions and we ask that you provide in-depth responses. You may be contacted if clarification is needed after the initial interview by phone or e-mail. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. You are able to opt out of the recording however you will be unable to participate in the study.

COMPENSATION/INCENTIVES:

You will not receive compensation or incentives. Participation in this study is voluntary.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

The records of this study will be kept private and your confidentiality will be protected. In any sort of report the researcher might publish, no identifying information will be included. The only exception to maintaining confidentiality would be if you indicate that there is immediate and serious danger to the health or physical safety of yourself or others. In that case, a professional may have to be contacted. We would always talk to you about this first.

Identifiable research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records. All data will be kept in encrypted files on a laptop or in a locked, secure location by the investigator. All study records with identifiable information, including
approved IRB documents, tapes, transcripts, and consent forms, will be destroyed by shredding and/or deleting after 3 years.

**VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY:** Participation in this study is voluntary and requires your informed consent. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with St. John Fisher College. If you decide to participate, you are free to skip any question that is asked. You may also withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.

**CONTACTS, REFERRALS AND QUESTIONS:** The researchers conducting this study: Jimmell Gorley. If you have questions, you are encouraged to contact the researcher at jg05026@sjfc.edu. You may also contact the researcher’s chair Dr. Janice Kelly at jkelly@sjfc.edu.

The Institutional Review Board of St. John Fisher College has reviewed this project. For any concerns regarding this study/or if you feel that your rights as a participant (or the rights of another participant) have been violated or caused you undue distress (physical or emotional distress), please contact the SJFC IRB administrator by phone during normal business hours at (585) 385-8012 or irb@sjfc.edu.

If this study causes any emotional distress, please contact your healthcare provider.

**STATEMENT OF CONSENT:**

I am 18 years of age or older. I have read and understood the above information. I consent to voluntarily participate in the study.

Signature:_______________________________________________ Date: ____________

Signature of Investigator:_________________________________  Date: _____________

I agree to be audio recorded/ transcribed ____ Yes ____No If no, I understand that the researcher will select another participant

Signature:_______________________________________________ Date: ____________

Signature of Investigator:_________________________________  Date: _____________

*Please keep a copy of this informed consent for your records.*
Appendix D

Interview Questions

1. How would you describe your relationship with your child(ren) prior to incarceration?

2. How would you describe your relationship with your family/spouse prior to incarceration?

3. How would you describe your role as a mother prior to your incarceration?
   (i.e. primary caregiver, custody, living with, etc.)

4. Did incarceration effect the relationships that you had with child(ren)/caregivers? How?

5. What were your experiences with parenting during incarceration?

6. While incarcerated what factors helped you parent or communicate with your child(ren) during incarceration?

7. What assistance do you feel you could have received to make parenting in prison easier?

8. How did your relationship with your child(ren) change following incarceration?

9. Were you able to learn any parenting techniques from peers?

10. During your incarceration were there any parenting classes or reentry classes offered?

11. What was your experience with these programs, if any?
12. What can correctional agencies do to better assist incarcerated mothers?

13. Was there any training or information provided as it relates to parenting by the medical staff?

14. Do you think the correctional facility made visitation and communication with child(ren)/family difficult for families to participate?

15. How can communication be improved within correction facilities to maintain the connections between mothers and families?

16. What was your experience with parenting upon release?

17. How did your experiences differ or mirror your expectations?

18. Do you believe the correctional facility could have better prepared you for parenting and reentry? How?

19. Were your child(ren)/family receptive to your reentry and assuming the role of primary caregiver?

20. Upon release, were you ready to be a primary caregiver? Why?

21. What, if anything, could you have done differently to achieve better results with your parenting/reentry experiences?

22. What advice/recommendations would you make for incarcerated mothers who would like to be a better parent for their child(ren) upon release?