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Family Ties: Exploring Familial Relationships for Individuals with a Felony Conviction

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## Introduction

Incarceration rates in the United States have increased dramatically over the past 30 years. In the early 1970s there was a drastic increase that has continued in the subsequent decades. Towards the end of 2008, the total number of individuals in jails and prisons in the U.S. was 2.3 million individuals; this is equivalent to 754 inmates per 100,000 of the population (Weiss and Doris 2010). The number of inmates for both men and women has also changed over the past years. Their incarceration rates have increased from 1977 to 2008: women's incarceration rate grew by 943%, whereas men's incarceration rates increased by 520% (Celinska and Siegel 2010). Since the rates of incarceration have been growing, it is important to consider the reentry process that individuals have to face. In the year 2010, 750,000 individuals were released from either state or federal prisons and this number has continued to grow ever since (Hattery and Smith 2010). This has caused policymakers and citizens to focus and be concerned with the prevention of recidivism instead of focusing on the process that these released individuals go through as they reunite with their families (Rose and Clear 2003).

High rates of incarceration constitute a concern for individuals being incarcerated and their families. Most of the studies done on the reentry of ex-prisoners focus more on the transition that individuals have to go through when released from jail and on the prevention of recidivism. However, there has not been much attention paid to the effects that family has on individuals with a felon status. Family can either cause harm or be supportive during the reintegration process. Children, in particular, play an important role in the lives of released prisoners; over half of individuals in state and federal prisons reported having a child at the time of their incarceration (Travis and Waul 2003). Since many prisoners have children, the separation from them has an effect on the way that they rebuild their relationship not only with

their children but also with their family after being release. The relationship that incarcerated individuals maintain with their children while in prison and after being released greatly depends on gender. Gender is an important factor because men and women react differently to the separation from their children. This helps to understand the difficulty that individuals have in rebuilding the relationship with their family and the difficulty they encounter when in their reentry process.

For the past several decades, there have been studies concerning the difference between female and male offenders and the hardships that they go through when leaving prison (Celinska and Siegel 2010). The social stigma placed on individuals that were incarcerated makes it difficult for them to find jobs and reintegrate back into their families (Rose and Clear 2003). While both men and women face challenges when reentering their lives post-release, reentry research has not fully examined the extent to which gender differences shape reentry experiences. For example, existing literature suggests that relationships with family and children can be an important element of the reentry process, but there is strong evidence to suggest that released men and women experience these relationships in sharp contrast. The relationship that the offender has with their family is significant because “fractured families may reunite and repair their relationship or they may disintegrate further after the offender is released from prison” (Rose and Clear 2003:317).

The relationship that incarcerated individuals have with their children greatly depends on the parental role and gender differences. For example, incarcerated men and women treat the separation from their family differently; female offenders are affected more by family matters (Wright et al. 2012). Women tend to go through depression while they are incarcerated because they are separated from their children; this leads women prisoners to equip themselves with

different coping strategies. They have to constantly talk with their children through the phone or through letters in order to not lose contact with them (Celinska and Siegel 2010). In order to examine the experiences that men and women have with their families and the effects that family have on individuals being released, this study will analyze in-depth interview data from 30 respondents from Milwaukee County. This study will explore the relationships that individuals with felony convictions have with their families and how gender can shape and affect these experiences.

### **Experiences of Reentry for Individuals with a Criminal Status**

The high incarceration rates in the United States have led scholars to endeavor to understand the experiences of incarcerated individuals and their lives post-release. The reintegration process of released prisoners is often characterized by high levels of stigma and discrimination (Cobbina 2010). There have been numerous studies on reentry, many of which focus on ex-prisoners' financial needs and on their limited sources (Rose and Clear 2003). Most of the researchers who have studied the reentry process of ex-prisoners have found that these individuals face financial needs as they reintegrate back into the community; it becomes a struggle because of limited jobs that are available to ex-prisoners, which tend to be low paying and therefore insufficient to sustain themselves or their families (Rose and Clear 2003). These challenges are easier to overcome when they have this family support system, however, many of the times these relationships with their family have been severed due to their incarceration.

Prisoners not only have to deal with trying to be accepted by society but also by their families. The burden of guilt can be overwhelming when prisoners believe that they have disappointed their families by not being able to fulfill their role as part of that family (Covington 2003). Very little is known about how the reentry process affects incarcerated individuals and

their families. There still needs to be more unpacking of the question of what happens when ex-prisoners return home to their families and whether families provide support for them. Studies have shown that family is important for individuals during their time of incarceration and after their release. Families take over responsibilities that prisoners can no longer do, some of which consist of financially taking care of their children or watching over business that they had (Hairston 2003). Families are seen as anchors that provide released prisoners with a place to live, with food, or with connections to job opportunities (Travis and Waul 2003).

The concept of family is mentioned when it comes to the reintegration process of ex-prisoners because “the involvement of family in the prisoner’s transition has also shown promise for improving post-prison outcomes” (Travis and Waul 2003: 11). Nevertheless, there are reasons as to why families might not want to provide their support to release prisoners. The first is that often families are not able to provide support because they have to deal with their own problems or do not have the financial means to help them out (Travis and Waul 2003). Second, families might not be willing to help because the incarceration has strained the relationship that they had with their family member and simply do not want to provide them with a second opportunity (Travis and Waul 2003). Other times, it is better that released individual stay away from their family because they pose the threat of leading them back into abuse and addiction which can result in their return to criminal activity (Travis and Waul 2003).

The research that has been done on the reentry of individuals with a felony conviction shows that children remain an integral aspect of incarcerated mothers and fathers. The Bureau of Justice Statistics indicated that “55 percent of state prisoners and 63 percent of federal prisoners reported having a child under the age of 18”; as a result this had an effect on 300,000 households with a minor child (Rose and Clear 2003: 313). Families become disintegrated when the

children's parents are incarcerated as a result of a loss of relationship between parent and child because they are not able to see them daily. Yet most extant studies show that women are most at-risk of losing their parental rights because when a parent is incarcerated, children who were often in the custody of their mothers prior to detention became distant with them. Johnson and Waldfogel (2004) demonstrated that when fathers were the ones that were incarcerated, 78% of the time children stayed with the mother, whereas when it was the mother whom was incarcerated the children stayed 65% of the time with their grandparent or another relative and 10% of the time the children ended up in a foster or a group home. The number of children that stay without both parents is increasing because the rate of incarcerated mothers has doubled since 1991 (Celinska and Siegel 2010).

The role that prisoners have in their families might be greatly influenced by gender. One of the major differences that have been analyzed between female and male prisoners has been their relationship with their children (Covington 2003). Celinska and Siegel (2010) demonstrate that children play more of an essential role in the life of incarcerated women than in the lives of incarcerated men. For instance, it has been seen that women that are incarcerated face a harder family burden than incarcerated men because "women in prison are the main caregivers of their children before going to jail" (Celinska and Siegel 2010: 449). As a result of this, Celinska and Siegel (2010) consider that the hardest part about being incarcerated for mothers is being away from their children. Childbearing is more central to reentry experiences for women as compared to men (Covington 2003). Children play an important role in the life of women because "they provide further confirmation about rather or not a woman is a good mother" (Celinska and Siegel 2010:458). Incarcerated mothers continue to fulfill their role as a mother by making sure that their children have what they need and by not losing contact with them (Celinska and Siegel

2010). Having a good connection with their children allows incarcerated mothers to remain optimistic and resist being away from their children. Female prisoners rely more on their families for assistance and support during their reintegration process, which is why children are usually associated with women (Cobbina 2010). Therefore, when women are convicted of a felony, they have to face the social stigma of a criminal conviction in addition to the shame of being a mother that is unable to take care of her children (Celinska and Siegel 2010).

Mothers are seen as having a crucial role in the life of their children more than fathers, and for that reason, “incarcerated women are portrayed as inadequate, incompetent mothers who are unable to provide adequately for the needs of their children” (Covington 2003:76). Being away from their children and not being able to fulfill their motherly role provides stress and increases hardship for incarcerated mothers. The studies done by Travis and Waul (2003) illustrate feelings of culpability and shame, especially when mothers are not able to see their children; “54% of women in state prisons had had no personal visits with their children since their admission as of 2000” (Travis and Waul 2003:77). Travis and Waul (2003) discovered that several factors contribute to the lack of visitation of the children. The first is that most female prisoners are incarcerated far away from their community, which makes it difficult for the grandparents or other family members to bring the child to visit their parent. Second, prisoners believed that there was no need for their children to visit them because they thought that they were going to be out soon so they did not want to expose their children to that type of environment (Travis and Waul 2003). Disrupting the relationship between mothers and their children complicates the reentry process, as “mothers see children as motivation for change and their primary purpose in life” (Celinska and Siegel 2010:450).



The work that has been done on gender informs us that women struggle from the separation from their children and that they face a greater social stigma for not being able to fulfill their parental role, whereas men might struggle more trying to find a job because of the felony conviction stigma that is placed on them by society (Travis and Waul 2003).

Nevertheless, it has not been studied in detail whether the reentry process of ex-offenders into their family makes a difference based on gender and whether the support that families offer is beneficial to the reentry process. It is important to fill in the gaps to these questions, to seek existence between gender differences for ex-offenders that come into play when dealing with family relationships, and also to be aware of the challenges that these individuals face as they try to unite with their families. The reentry process is a chance for ex-prisoners to fill in the gaps that were made between them and their families due to their incarceration.

### **Data and Methods**

The information that was obtained for this study was taken from 30 audio-taped face-to-face interviews of individuals who had a prior criminal record. The interviews that were done consisted of 10 women and 20 men who were assisted from a non-profit reentry program that was located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (Hlavka, Wheelock and Cossyleon 2012). This non-profit reentry program in Milwaukee has been in place for over 30 years. The main goal of this program is to aid individuals with a criminal background. Some of the things that the program assists with involve searching for jobs, developing better working skills, and counseling for drug and alcohol abuse (Heather et al. 2012). The program does several community integrations in places such as schools, churches and community events. The program provides the clients with awards of accomplishments which are given in annual fundraiser events and are displayed on boards. When the clients have completed the intake process they are assigned a caseworker that

helps them with the process of employment. This entails resume building, interview and computer skills and any other worries that they might have about the process (Hlavka, Wheelock and Cossyleon 2012).

The participants that were interviewed were not generalized and were elected over a wide range of unique groups, making it possible to analyze the reentry experiences of a variety of groups of individuals. The interviews were conducted in a private space where only one researcher and one respondent participate at a time. The interview lasted an average time of 90 minutes and the participants were given \$40 as part of their participation. The interview questions that were asked covered areas such as: (1) “their background and case history; (2) stressful events and reintegration; (3) employment and education; (4) family and support system; (5) voting practices and understanding of current law; (6) re-offense and reintegration; (7) and specific questions relating to sexual offending” (Hlavka, Wheelock and Cossyleon 2012).

### **Qualitative Data Analysis**

The findings that were obtained from the interviews conducted indicated the role that family played in the lives of the released prisoners who were interviewed. For the majority of the individuals who were being interviewed, children played an important role in their lives one way or another. The relationship that they maintain with their children while in prison and after they were released differed based on the gender of the individual. Children were the cause of motivation and emotional distress such as frustration, regret and depression throughout the process for reentry of these individuals. While imprisoned, these individuals regretted not being able to be role models or set an example for their children. It, however, became tremendously important for them to receive encouragement and support from their children upon their release

because this lead them to continue building their relationship with their children even after having been separated from them.

A common trend that was seen amongst both men and women who were interviewed was that children provided support and comfort for the majority of the individuals who were parents. Being away from their children made many of them realize that they had to start over and get their life back on track, it became an easier transition when they had the support and love of their children. The primary incentive for their change was knowing that their children counted on them and that they looked up to them. Damian elaborated on his by saying “I’m happy to be free. Like my youngest daughter said, I don’t care nothing about what you can do and what you have. I just need you out here. And that’s what woke me up. During that time I said I was going to change my life, I can’t do this no more. But my daughter my youngest daughter was the one that really touched me.” Just like in the case of Damian, many other prisoners attributed their strength and potential of starting a new life to their children, because without their assistance and encouraging words they would have probably still be in jail or would have taken the wrong path once more.

When analyzing the interview data it became certain that children constituted an important part in the reentry process for the individuals that were interviewed. The data also indicated that there were some important gender differences that were seen after analyzing the data. Based on what men and women said in regards to their children, there was an indication that both genders maintain a different relationship with their children. A role reversal was seen amongst the men and their children. The results that were done showed that instead of the men fulfilling their role as a parent, the children were the ones that were carrying out that role. Their children would show concern for their fathers and would tend to keep track of them to make sure

that they were doing what they were supposed to be doing. For example, Damian stated: “my kids they really behind me. They basically are trying to guide me not to go back down that road. Every time I see them, they call me, what you doing? They want to make sure I'm not doing the wrong thing.” It was significant for the men to see and hear that their children were being supportive throughout their time seeking employment and their reintegration into society. Their children would not only provide them with inspiring words in stressful situations but also set the example for them. Roy explained that when he would come home high he would see his daughter studying hard. This made him realize that his daughter was not dumb and that she wanted to obtain a degree and in order to be someone in life. From that moment he realized that he wanted to do something different with his life and set an example for his children just like they were doing it for him.

In contrast to the men, women seemed to maintain their role as a parent throughout their incarceration. The primary goal for most women was to maintain contact with their children during their imprisonment. Some of the women showed their frustration of being away from their children by saying that since they were mothers it was not correct for them to be in jail. Veronica stated: “mothers do not belong in jail. I’m a mother; I can’t keep going to jail. I’m a grandmother I want my grandkids to look up to me.” Keisha was another woman who expressed her viewpoint of being away from her children. She said that: “prison was a horrible place for anybody to be in, especially woman”; this was because they “have to deal with the fact that they are away from their children.” According to Keisha, being separated from her children was a horrifying experience, which is why prison was not a place for any mother. These women were able to motivate themselves with the visits that they receive from their children while they were incarcerated; this allowed them to maintain their parent role by not losing contact with their

children. Just like in the case of Veronica, many of the other women never lost contact with their children because even though they were incarcerated, their children were their main priority. Staying in touch with their children while in prison was what made the relationship of mothers with their children stronger, and it was something that was essential after their release because it helped them build upon the relationship with their children. Unlike in the case of the men, who did not want their children to come and visit them when they were incarcerated, and due to the lack of contact with them, many men like Miguel “had to rebuild the relationship back with the children.”

Prisoners face many hardships while in prison and during their reentry, and because of that their relationship with their families is critical for their success throughout their process of reintegration (Naser and Visser 2006). Families become a fundamental support, especially when they provide financial and emotional support to their family members during their reintegration process. Nonetheless, families are not always helpful and at times might even form obstacles in the process of reentry for these ex-prisoners. The relationship that incarcerated individuals had with their families before being incarcerated might have been affected; ex-prisoners might be treated differently by some family members and others might try and lead them onto the wrong path again.

The data indicated that about half of the individuals received help and support from their families while they were incarcerated and after their release. Both men and women who were interviewed stated that a good support system was created when family members would go visit them, which was something important because it would make them feel loved and valued. Family members were supportive by taking care of their children and bringing them to see their parents while they were in prison. Watching over their children while they were in prison and

after they got out was one of the best way to provide them with support, according to Darla, who said “you know, there’s some days I don’t come home right away and they make sure they watch my kids because, my kids come home every weekend. When I’m in school, they make sure they eat you know.” Their family members knew that the transition from prison into society was going to be challenging and that is why not only their help was fundamental but also their support. Knowing that it was going to be complicated to acquire a job, parents and family members would assist them with money, clothes and a place to live in. The majority of the individuals interviewed reported that after they were release they went to go live with a family member. The same way that children played a crucial role in the reintegration process for these individuals family was also tremendously important. Derek mentioned what had helped him throughout the process of his reentry: “I think my family support that was a big one. I think honestly, if I didn’t have the family support, I probably would have stayed in Texas and went back to the same people and either end up dead or in prison for the rest of my life”.

Unlike the way that family helped out many of these individuals, about half of the other individuals were denied support from their families and instead were harmed and abandoned by them. James described the lack of involvement of his family in his life. He communicated that the only time that his family talked to him was if he had money in his pockets. Before he went to prison, his family members would come to him and ask to borrow money, but after his release from prison his family would occasionally talk to him unless he had something of value to offer them. Not only did their family members not support these individuals unconditionally, but instead of providing them with motivation and strength, they became bad influences. Many of the goals of the individuals interviewed was to start a new life, one in which they would do something successful with their life and stay away from things that would cause them to commit

crime again. This is primarily the reason why many of them decided to distance themselves away from their family. Jay, who had to maintain distance from his family, said “We, my family, we get along. I really don’t have any conflicts. It’s just that I don’t drink or smoke weed no more and those that do, I really don’t try to hang around with them because I don’t want to get drawn back to that. So I really just am distant.” Randell said something along those lines as well: he stated that his family drank and smoked marijuana and he felt like he could not be around them or else he was going to fall back into his old life style.

Part of the reason why families denied their help was because they disliked the fact that one of their family members had a conviction; like in the case of John, many of them have not heard or had any connection with their family members because of their criminal history. Others, in order to avoid confrontation with their family, tried to avoid seeing them. It became a hardship on these individuals because their reentry process was not only difficult but also stressful. Their own family was stigmatizing them for what they had done. Paul described his experience with his family by saying that when they found out that he was a felon, they “dropped him like a hot potato” and the worst part was that they lost trust in him because he said “I used to, manage all of my mom’s money. And as soon as the rest of the family found out that I got arrested, they changed all the passwords on all the accounts and everything so I couldn’t manage it anymore. Cause they were afraid that I’d steal from her. And, so yeah, I had a lot of negative ramifications.” It was seen that the lack of family support was more common in the cases of individuals that had been sex offenders. Most of their families reject them for what they had done and did not want them close to them because they feared that they would do it again. Peter, who had been a sex offender, had to distance himself from his sister because her husband rejected him and did not want anything to do with him. Family members would not allow them

to be at family parties, like in the case of Tom who was not able to attend the wedding of his cousin's daughter because his sister did not think that it was appropriate.

Several of the individuals reported that they did not have a good relationship with some of their family members because they had been abused by them. Women were the ones that reported that they had been abused by a family member. Two of the women who reported their abuse were Sharon and Yoyo. Sharon was abused by her father and Yoyo by her grandfather. The abuse happened before they were incarcerated. However, this has been something that has affected their family relationship because they have tried and stayed away from the individuals that harmed them. Unfortunately, Sharon's mother is also not really involved in her life and does not offer her much support, which makes her look for a motherly figure elsewhere, like in her religion. Family relationships can be important before and after an individual has been incarcerated. The type of support that family members offer, whether it is financially, emotional or supportive, is extremely important for the process of reentry, yet it is also true that when families are not able to provide these positive things it is best that they stay away from these individuals throughout their process of reentry because they will not be of much help to them.

The partners of the individuals interviewed also formed a part of their reentry process. The results indicated that their partners either provided them with help and support or would be abusive and unsupportive with them. Partners would be supportive when they would bring the children to see their mother in prison or when they would motivate them and understand them, like in the case of Rabbit, who said: "well my wife, because, is the only person I have, and I'm the only person she's got around, close, so...we're together, you know. We stick together, she supports me. Well because she knows, she understands I'm not a criminal. She knows that kind of person I am." Having the support of the person that you love made it an easier transition from



prison, knowing that they are not looked at differently because of what they did is something that these individuals really cherished about their partners.

The lack of support and broken relationships with their partners was also present in some of the lives of these individuals. Incarceration ended the marriage of some of the men. The distance and the fact that they were in jail and were not able to provide their family with what they needed was what lead their wives to divorce them. Steptwo talked about how there was no communication with his wife and their relationship started to do downhill; his wife was making more money than he was and he felt as though she did not need him, which is why she agreed on getting a divorce. John, who wanted to go back with his wife and children, could not because his wife had divorced him due to his criminal record and was not going to accept him back. For those that ended going back with their partners after having been release, several of them were abused instead of being helped. Lynne was dating a guy who was an ex-offender and who would physically abuse her; she, however, never reported him and decided to stay with him. Other individuals decided to stay with their partner because of their children. This was the case of Keisha and Damian. Damian stated: “lot of times we had our problems, I thought about the kids. I don't want my kids, you know, hurt. They gonna hurt if we break up. And her kids gonna hurt if we break up, because we was one big family. So I thought about the kids more I thought about myself.” Keisha did the same thing when she tried to make her marriage work because she wanted her family to stay together. In both of these cases, the partners of these individuals were not helpful; however, these individuals decided to sacrifice their happiness for the stability of their family.

## Conclusion

Previous research done has indicated that family plays an important role within the reentry process of released prisoners. Individuals that are released from prison encounter many struggling situations, such as looking for a place to live or finding a new job, and the support that their family provides them helps them overcome some of these struggles. The results of the research demonstrated that there were various types of family support that were provided to these individuals who were interviewed. Several of the areas in which their family members assisted them with dealt with motivational support, financial assistance and taking care of their children. Previous research continues to focus on the support families of released prisoners provide; nonetheless, this research finds that families are not always supportive or helpful. Families can also reinforce patterns of drug abuse, stigmatize and exclude released individuals. The lack of family guidance and support was seen with some of the individuals that were interviewed. Many of their family members rejected them, abused them and were a bad influence to these individuals that wanted to start a better life.

Future research regarding how gender plays into effect with the support that families provide ex-prisoners should be extended. The data that was collected from the interviews showed that mothers and fathers had a different relationship with their children while they were incarcerated and after their release. A role reversal was seen amongst the fathers and their children, whereas mothers never lost their parental role. There should be a focus on whether the support that families provide varies on gender and whether one gender benefits more from the support that their family offers them. In addition, one of the areas that have been neglected is the different experiences of abuse that incarcerated individuals face and how that shapes their reentry process. The little that is known is that incarcerated women are more likely of being

abused than incarcerated men. Future research should partake in the examination of the role that abuse plays into the reintegration process of released prisoners and how it shapes the support that families provide for them.

It is important that future policies pay attention to the condition under which families can be harmful verses supportive. Families can be complicated and instead of providing support they may cause harm to released individuals. The expectation that prisoners have of their families is not always met; there are times in which their family is not able to provide them with support. Many individuals cycle in and out of prison and this might be due to the family environment that they encounter themselves during their reentry process. Released prisoners face themselves with stress and health outcomes that have not really been taken into consideration. These health issues arrive from being in harmful and stressful family environments. Future findings on further research that is conducted regarding prisoners reentry and their family ties should be included in the development of programs that help individuals with this transition. In these cases individuals should truly benefit from programs that would assist them with the support and motivation that their families are not able to provide them with when they are dealing with issues such as stress and depression. The reintegration process of released individuals is difficult and requires assistance and support whether it is financially or emotionally; this is why programs designated to these needs should be offered to these individuals while and after prison. Knowing the different family experiences that ex-prisoners face helps to better understand the chances of recidivism of these individuals.

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