

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



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# Criminal Punishment in the U.S.

- ▶ The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world (Douglas and MacKenzie 2010)
  - There are 2.3 million individuals in prisons and jails in the U.S. (Douglas and MacKenzie 2010)
  - 7 million under correction supervision (includes probation or parole)
  - 700,000 individuals are released from prisons annually (Hattery and Smith 2010).

Since the rates of incarceration have been growing, it is important to consider the reentry process that individuals have to face

This has caused policymakers and citizens to focus with the prevention of recidivism instead of focusing on the process that these released individuals go through as they reunite with their families

# Family and Reentry

- ▶ Studies have shown that family is important for individuals during their time of incarceration and after their release.
  - As Travis and Waul argue “the involvement of family in the prisoner’s transition has also shown promise for improving post-prison outcomes”
- ▶ Children in particular, play an important role in the lives of released prisoners
  - “55 percent of state prisoners and 63 percent of federal prisoners reported having a child under the age of 18” (Rose and Clear 2003: 313).

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 said that family is important and beneficial in the reentry process.

# Mothers and Children

- ▶ Mothers are especially important to children as they are usually the primary caretakers.
- ▶ When women are sent to prison, their status as mothers is compromised
  - “Incarcerated women are portrayed as inadequate, incompetent mothers who are unable to provide adequately for the needs of their children” (Covington 2003:76).

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”

Therefore, I expect that the importance of families to the lives of released prisoners varies by gender.

# RESEARCH QUESTION

- ▶ Existing literature suggest that family members are positive and supportive and this is very likely to be true however,
  - 1) Are there instances where families are not supportive and if so, what are the specific problems?
  - 2) How do these experiences with family vary by gender?



However I decided to focus my research on two questions the first being....

# DATA

- ▶ 30 in-depth interviews
- ▶ 20 Men
- ▶ 10 Women
- ▶ Varied offenses
  - Sex offenses
  - Reckless homicide
  - Drug-related
  - Felony DUI
  - Robbery
- ▶ 23-55 years
  - 41.6 average
- ▶ 22 African American; 6 Caucasian; 2 Hispanic
- ▶ 72.4% unemployment rate

# ANALYSIS

- ▶ Qualitative Analysis – thematic coding
  - Coded interview transcripts for any mention of family
  - Coded these excerpts for three themes
    - Children
    - Partners
    - Immediate and extended kinship ties
- ▶ Specific topics :
  - Emotional distress ( frustration and regret)
  - Abuse
  - Severed relationships
  - Support

# General Findings

- ▶ Common themes for both men and women

## Children

- Children were the cause of considerable emotional distress
  - Regret
  - Frustration
  - Depression
- Being away from their children made many of them realize that they had to get their life back on track, and it became an easier transition when they had the support and love of their children.

children played an important role in their lives one way or another.



# Children Support

## Damian

"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."

## Lynne

"Yes, my children. I've never wanted to commit a crime...is well my children and doing positive things keeps me uplifted even when everything is not really going right."

Damian, a 49 year old African American male was convicted of multiple offenses. He talked about how the primary incentive for his change was knowing that his children counted on him and that they wanted him by their side.

Lynne a 42 African American female was convicted of forgery and ID theft, attributed her strength and potential of starting a new life to her children,

When asked by he interviewer, "Is there anything in your experience that has kept you from wanting to commit any crime?"

## **...General Findings**

- ▶ Another common theme for both men and women was:

### **Family**

- Families provided respondents with financial and emotional support but were also the source of dysfunction.

# Family Relationships

## Darla

“you know, there’s some days I don’t come home right away and [my family] 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.”

## Randell

“Sometime, you even gotta let family go. ‘Cause like in my case, most of my family members, everywhere I went, somebody was smoking marijuana, smoking cocaine and drinking. And, I can’t be around it because it’s like a bad trigger for me you know.”

## Paul

“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.”

Darla a 28 year old African American Female was convicted because of a drug offense. according to Darla 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,

Randell a 44 year old African American male was convicted of multiple crimes (armed robbery- first, theft, burglary). He talks about he had to distance himself from his family because they were a bad influence.

Paul, a 55 year old White male convicted of drug conspiracy..... Even though he was convicted of his family distress him and stigmatized him.

# Gender Differences

- Men and women respondents had different relationships with their children.
- Fathers: Role Reversal
  - Instead of fulfilling their role as fathers, children often cared for and supported men respondents



Gender differences

# Role Reversal

## Damian

“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.”

## Roy

...”one of the biggest blessings and changes in my life, was my kids, because it was like- like I said, I got a daughter in Marquette, man. When I came home the last time high and she was sitting in my house getting straight As through high school, it was like, man, this girl ain't stupid. You know what I mean? And that was a spark and a trigger.”

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.

Roy a 44 year old African American male was convicted of multiple crimes (property crimes, burglary, theft). 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.

Their children would not only provide them with inspiring words in stressful situations but also set the example for them.

## **...Gender Differences**

- ▶ 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 and after they were released.

It was important that their children visit them while they were imprisoned and the times that they didn't several of them were depressed and reported having to take depression pills.

## Maintenance Of Parental Role

### Veronica

“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

“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.”

### Latasha

“I don't have no help right now because I don't leave my kids with anybody and my mom been very busy and so it's like as soon as I got in there, it's like she got busy, so I just ain't been doing nothing. But now I'm going to try to find somebody I can trust with my kids until I can get a job.”

Veronica, a 49 year old African American women convicted of a drug offense demonstrated her frustration of being away from her children by saying that ....  
Maintenance Of Parental Role

Keisha, a 33 year old African American woman convicted of reckless homicide. According to Keisha being separated from their children was a horrifying experience, which is why prison was not a place for any mother

Latasha a 26 year old African American female was convicted of a drug offense was one of the women who was not able to find a job because she had to take care of her children.

## Partners and Kinship Ties

- ▶ Additional differences between men and women
  - Abuse
    - patterns of substance abuse and continued physical and sexual abuse



# Abuse

Yoyo

“My grandfather sexually abused of me. And even to this day, if I go around him, he'll make little remarks and try to rub on me and feel on me and I'm grown now.”

Keisha

“He kept cheating and I kept taking him back and trying to make marriage work because I'm a family person and he kept doing it and taking advantage.”

Yoyo is a 46 year old African American convicted of Welfare fraud and Drugs she was in an abusive relationship for 13 years before she got incarcerated and her partner introduced her to drugs and prostitution on the street

# Conclusion

- ▶ Previous research continues to focus on the support families of released prisoners provide
- ▶ This research finds that families are not always supportive nor helpful
  - Families can also reinforce patterns of drug abuse, stigmatize and exclusion for released prisoners.
- ▶ It is important that future policies pay attention to the condition under which families can be harmful and supportive
- ▶ These issues are vitally important because:
  - Many individuals cycle in and out of prisons
  - Stress and health outcomes

- Research shows about ½ of annual prison admits are individual that failed conditions of their parole or probation – and harmful family environments can play a role in that.
- Researchers know very little about the ways in which stress from harmful family environments can adversely affect health outcomes for released prisoners

# References

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