PARENTING AND PAROLE:
THE EFFECTS OF INCARCERATION ON MOTHERHOOD

by

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A THESIS
Submitted to the graduate faculty of The University of Alabama at Birmingham in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science

BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA
2013
ABSTRACT

The female prison population is the fastest growing prison population in the United States. The rise in female incarceration over the past several years has become a growing concern partly due to the damaging effects on the family; a phenomenon largely attributed to mandatory sentencing guidelines and gender-neutral policies. Research literature on the unique challenges faced by parenting women and the development of reentry programs that foster family reunification has emerged in recent years, but there is still much work to be done. Using in-depth interviews with 14 residents of a transitional center for women in Alabama, I seek to explore the effects of incarceration on parenting women. Specifically, I plan to identify the challenges these mothers face during and after incarceration and ways in which they overcome those challenges in an attempt to become better mothers. I also sought to assess how transitional programs with an emphasis on family reunification aid in a mother’s transition from prison and helps her to reestablish her relationship with her children. This work contributes to the literature on the damaging effects incarceration has on mothers and presents data that supports reform of policies that are both outdated and gender-specific.

The findings in this study are consistent with theoretical research on female offender reentry that identifies the role of family relationships in recidivism prevention. The most compelling finding in the study is that many incarcerated women are striving to
overcome a multitude of challenges in a criminal justice system that does not foster family reunification.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my beautiful daughter, Harper Reese Ledyard. You inspire me every day to be the best that I can be. I work hard and dream big because I know you are watching. Always know that anything is possible when you think, speak, and live by faith.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, and above all, I thank the one true living God for the knowledge, resources, and abilities He has given me. You deserve the glory!

I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the people who have been instrumental in the successful completion of this project. I have grown so much academically since I began this journey. Over the past few years, I have been exposed to some of the most knowledgeable and prestigious individuals in the field of Criminology and for that I am grateful. I would like to thank my committee chair and supervisor, Dr. Heith Copes, for his invaluable assistance and guidance as I worked to complete this project. For over a year, you were available day and night, weekends, and holidays to answer my questions and give me instruction. Your passion for research is admirable and your dedication to your work and your students is unmatched. I’d like to express an enormous amount of gratitude to my mentor, Dr. Kathryn Morgan. Without her knowledge and assistance this study would not have been possible. Thank you, Dr. Morgan for taking a chance on me. Your support and encouragement over the past 4 years will never be forgotten. I would also like to thank Dr. Jeffrey Clair for serving on my committee and for his useful comments and remarks on this project. I’d like to thank the wonderful staff of The Lovelady Center for their help and cooperation. It was truly an honor to work in such a loving atmosphere. I’d also like to thank the participants who willingly shared pieces of their lives with me. I have been forever changed by your powerful testimonies.

I extend thanks to my parents, Princess and Gary James and my grandparents, Ethel and Charles King, Sr. for always believing in me and supporting me. For as long as I can remember, I have wanted nothing but to make you proud of me. I have watched you all work effortlessly to take care of the ones you love and that strong work ethic has been my motivation to go after my dreams. Thank you for setting the bar high! I will continue to strive every day to make you proud of me! I would also like to thank Pastor Gary Dixon for his many prayers and encouraging words. Thank you for recommending me for admission to this graduate program and for your faith in my capabilities.

An extra special thanks goes to my daughter, Harper for her patience and love. I spent a lot of hours away from home in pursuit of my degree and being away from you was the toughest part, by far. I will never get back those precious moments. Completion of this final task means that time was not in vain. Thank you for your beautiful smile, tender kisses, and warm hugs. They truly made those stress-filled days and nights worthwhile. Last, but certainly not least, I want to thank my husband Nic for being my support system and making sure our daughter was taken care of on those long days I spent away from home working on this project. Thank you for your encouragement throughout my entire graduate career and believing in me even when I didn’t believe in myself.

This project would not have been possible without the support of so many wonderful people. I am thankful to God that He placed you all in my life!
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INTRODUCTION

The female prison population is the fastest growing prison population in the United States. Although the number of female prisoners is still only a fraction of the total incarcerated population, the rise in female incarceration has become a growing concern in the United States because of the damaging effects on the family (Visher & Travis, 2003). The need for more re-entry programs that focus primarily on family re-unification and are designed to help female inmates overcome unique social and emotional challenges is the subject of much debate (Hairston, 2003). According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, approximately 70% of women under correctional sanction have minor children (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999). Since the majority of the women offenders are mothers, there is a major concern for what happens to the parent-child relationship during and after incarceration because women are more likely than men to be the primary caretaker of their children. Visher and Travis (2003) argue that one potential strategy for recidivism reduction is to direct more resources towards policy reform and program implementation which supports vulnerable families during incarceration and through the reentry process. This research suggests that the effect incarceration has on mothers should be at the forefront of re-entry planning for incarcerated women.

Indeed, inmates re-entering society are faced with a number of obstacles for successful re-integration. The transition from prison to home is a difficult one that is comprised of a combination of factors that are both subjective and objective; some of
which are gender specific (Brown & Bloom, 2009). The fact that female inmates differ from their male counterparts in issues related to family is one that must be addressed. Until recently, much of the literature on re-entry has focused primarily on issues related to male offenders. Assistance with housing, education, substance abuse, and life skills are basic services made available by most transitional programs across the United States and are beneficial to all inmates regardless of gender or parental status. However, services that are both specific to and that place an emphasis on the unique challenges faced by parenting women leaving prison are not as widely available. Luke (2002) argues that mandatory sentencing guidelines, a result of the war on drugs, and gender-neutral sentencing policies are responsible for the dramatic increase in the female prison population. Such guidelines impede an inmate mother’s ability to parent and adversely affect her children. The need for policy changes that facilitate reunification efforts is apparent now more than ever.

Although the number of incarcerated fathers continues to grow as the male prison population is still much larger than its female counterpart, more and more mothers are taking up residence in our nation’s prisons. Approximately 65,500 women who have minor children are in custody in prisons across the United States (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010). In this same statistical report, over half the inmate mothers reported living with their minor children just prior to their incarceration with forty-one percent of them reporting raising their kids in a single-parent household (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010). These mothers, faced not only with the issues any inmate is challenged with upon re-entry, must also step back into the role of a mother. The challenge then is determining what programs and resources can be afforded to these women to help them successfully
negotiate the transition from prison to home and reintegrate with their children.

Transitional homes have played a role in the support of inmates returning to the community. Some of these programs have been designed to give women the tools necessary to preserve and strengthen the bond between mother and child, but their effectiveness is still uncertain.

The importance of establishing mother-child bonds on re-entry is apparent in the research literature on reentry and parenting. Indeed, determining those factors that make for successful transitions after prison is important. Numerous research methodologies can address this issue; however, it is important to understand the issue from the perspective of those who experience it first-hand (i.e., incarcerated mothers).

Thus, the purpose of this qualitative study is to (1) explore the effects of incarceration on parenting women (2) determine how incarcerated mothers cope with separation from their children, and (3) assess how transitional programs aid in the mother-child reunification process. By speaking with women in a half-way house about motherhood issues my aim is to shed light on the challenges they face in a system of strict regulatory practices and policies that does not foster a positive mother-child relationship. This knowledge will provide insights into how women define themselves as mothers and orient their lives to re-establish lost connections with their children. It will also aid in our understanding of how half-way houses can better prepare women in their quest to become “good” mothers.
BACKGROUND

At the end of 2011, nearly 1.6 million prisoners resided in state and federal prisons across the United States (Carson & Sabol, 2012). The topic of prisoner reentry is a very pressing issue as it is inevitable that many of these prisoners will return to our communities. Upon their release, nearly 600,000 inmates reenter communities all across the nation annually (Travis et al., 2001). Faced with the complex question of “what now”, many of these ex-offenders return to the criminal justice system. For parenting female inmates, the answer to this question is further complicated. Considered by some researchers to be a “collateral” consequence of incarceration, the strain incarceration places on the mother’s relationships with her family and especially her children should be relevant in social policy and practice (Christian, 2005; Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999). It is evident that the current criminal justice design ignores the unique needs of parenting women and the importance of family reunification. Despite its insignificance in the social policy agenda, there is much literature that supports the need for more reentry programs designed to promote family reunification.

To lay the groundwork for this study, it is important to understand what reentry is. Travis, Mcbride and Solomon (2005) of the Urban Institute define reentry as “the process of leaving prison and returning to society.” Because the existence of prison reentry is manifested in the very process by which assistance is provided to offenders when they reenter society, it is also important to define reentry programming. Petersilia (2003) states that reentry programming, “simply defined includes all activities and programming conducted to prepare ex-convicts to return safely to the community and to live as law abiding citizens.” This definition implies that reentry programs must
adequately prepare offenders to reenter society and those offenders, only when properly prepared to reenter society, are less likely to reoffend.

Traditionally, the services offered by some reentry programs were limited to those that met one specific need such as substance abuse treatment or job placement (Lattimore & Visher, 2010). Though necessary and valuable to the reentry process, these types of programs fail to take into account the great number of difficulties faced by returning offenders and thus neglect to fully address all the needs of such a complex population (Lattimore & Visher, 2010).

Effective reentry programming is fundamental in the plight to reduce the number of offenders returning to prison. The ideal program would have the resources to meet every need that an ex-offender may have and could afford them every opportunity to successfully reintegrate into society. In her extensive work on prisoner reentry, Petersilia sought to shed light on the shortcomings of this nation’s current reentry system while proposing specific solutions that focus on assisting ex-inmates and maintaining public safety (Petersilia, 2003). She supports the notion that inmates who maintain positive familial ties during incarceration and a strong support system at release have a better chance of successfully integrating into society. An advocate for parole and sentencing policy reform, her empirical research offers analyses of criminal justice agencies that have greatly impacted the United States criminal justice system. Her work urges researchers and correctional practitioners to make a collaborative effort to more effectively manage prisoner reintegration (Petersilia, 2003).

The Lovelady Center (TLC) — a residential halfway house serving women in the Birmingham area— offers a range of services not found in some traditional transitional
programs. By the accounts of this study sample, the transition from prison to home is made easier for women at TLC because it meets their basic needs as well as encourages them to be better themselves. Offering such a wide range of services extends the center’s reach to women who may otherwise have nowhere else to go. Assistance for permanent housing is available as well as opportunities for transitioning women to further their education, obtain employment, and receive counseling and substance abuse treatment. This program is also equipped to handle healthcare and mental health needs.

**Challenges to Successful Reintegration**

The transition from prison to home comes with a number of challenges for many ex-offenders. Some of them lack adequate education, have limited employment skills, and suffer from substance abuse and mental health issues. Though they gain their freedom, it comes at a price for many who are unprepared and lack viable resources for successful reintegration. With such significant deficiencies, the prospect of rebuilding their lives can seem unattainable. One of the many issues faced by ex-offenders who are returning to the community is a lack of education. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 43% of inmates do not have a high school diploma or equivalency (Harlow, 2003).

Another challenge these ex-offenders face is the stigma associated with their criminal history. Being defined by their past criminal behavior often fosters the pattern of ongoing criminal behavior (O’Brien, 2001). This stigma can also come with a number of subsequent consequences; one of which is employability. Seeking employment upon their release is one of the toughest challenges faced by ex-offenders (Petersilia, 2003). Travis
et al. (2001) identified three potential reasons inmates returning to society face difficulty finding stable employment: the social stigma associated with incarceration, lack of job experience, and state legislation barring ex-offenders from specific work fields. It is the proverbial rock and a hard place for individuals who have paid their debt to society. An ex-offender’s overreliance on illegal income prior to incarceration also serves as a barrier to successfully finding employment upon their release (Visher et al., 2003). Twenty-one percent of the women in this study reported financially supporting themselves and their family by illegal means prior to incarceration. To these offenders, the prospect of “easy” and “fast” money can be more attractive than entering a work force where they will likely earn substantially less than before. These ex-offenders can also be handicapped by their previous job history or lack thereof (Visher et al, 2003; Visher et al, 2008).

Another issue that threatens the reentry process is substance abuse. Research shows that many prisoners suffer from drug or alcohol abuse, but only a small number of them receive treatment in prison and immediately upon release (Travis et al, 2001). In a 2002 BJS Statistical report, sixty-nine percent of women in local jails reported substance abuse or dependence. Past studies also show that drug use is linked to criminal activity in a majority of cases. Snell and Greenfeld (1999) found that over fifty percent of inmates in state prisons reported drug or alcohol use at the time they committed the offense for which they were serving time. For many of these women, incarceration is a direct result of substance abuse and related activities and causes mothers to be physically absent from their children even prior to incarceration (Arditti & Few, 2008). Arditti and Few reported the existence of maternal distress resulting from the guilt and remorse felt by mothers whose drug dependence caused a great deal of damage to their relationships with their
children. As will be demonstrated in this work, substance abuse serves as a catalyst, not for change or successful reintegration, but for the deterioration of their relationship with their children.

Motherhood and Reentry

Much of the criminal justice and social service literature prior to the 1990s neglected to address the effects of incarceration on parents. The primary focus two decades ago was more on the behavioral and emotional impacts on the children of incarcerated parents. Then, in the mid to late 1990s literature emerged that addressed the effect of prison reentry on the surrounding communities and public safety. This is most likely attributed to the nation’s prison population reaching unprecedented numbers during this era. All of this research has contributed greatly to prisoner reentry literature but has done little to emphasize the importance of familial preservation in the reentry process.

In 1998, the correctional population in the United States, including those supervised in the community, was made up of nearly 1 million adult women (Snell & Greenfeld, 1999). Though the number of incarcerated women is much smaller compared to men (Gilliard & Beck, 1994), this population has steadily increased over the past decade with a rise of 2.2% since the year 2000 (Guerino et al., 2011). Although there has been a significant increase in the female prison population, statistics show that a small percentage of women inmates (26%) are incarcerated for violent offenses (Travis et al., 2005). In a BJS Special Report conducted by Snell (1991), nearly half the women in prison in 1990 were serving sentences for nonviolent crimes and had no prior violent criminal history. A more recent report was consistent with these findings reporting that
over half of the female prison population in 2010 was serving time for property and drug offenses (Guerino et al., 2011).

Nearly 70 percent of women under correctional sanction have children under the age of 18 (Snell & Greenfeld, 1999). Snell (1994) reported that 90 percent of children who have fathers in prison live with their mothers, while only 25 percent of children whose mothers are in prison live with their fathers. In her analysis of data from inmate surveys with similar results to these statistics, Christian (2005) argued that a majority of male inmates are not connected to their children. Work by Travis and Waul (2001), summarized some of the unique differences between incarcerated mothers and fathers and supported the notion that because women are more likely than men to be the primary caretakers of children (Kennedy, 2012), the impact incarceration has on parenthood is felt greater by mothers than by fathers. In their study, they revealed that 65 percent of female inmates reported having a child compared to 55 percent of male inmates. According to a report released by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, in 2008 seventy-seven percent of mothers in state prison whose children resided with them before their incarceration provided most of the children’s daily care (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010). Researchers like Travis and Waul (2001) sought to add to a body of literature that supports a policy reform agenda fostering successful family reunification for prisoners.

When mothers go to prison, a large number of children are displaced, not to their other parent, but to other relatives and child welfare agencies. Despite the empirical proof of incarceration’s adverse effects on families, this subject continues to rank low on the social policy agenda. This notion is perhaps most clearly demonstrated by the failure of social service agencies and corrections officials to make available to inmates and their
families more services that ease the impact of incarceration (Hairston, 2003). As the female prison population continues to grow, so does the literature on reentry and motherhood. Researchers like Hairston and Kennedy place the unique needs of women offenders at the forefront of their examinations of incarceration and bring to light the correlation between maintaining positive family ties during incarceration and successful reintegration.

Arditti and Few (2008) argued that convictions for drug-related offenses have made women the fastest growing prison population. Their work on motherhood and reentry examined the levels of maternal distress in 28 mothers whom they interviewed while they were in the reentry process. Through narratives of the mothers’ various experiences, Arditti and Few uncovered three risk factors that threaten a positive parent-child relationship during and after incarceration, which they called the “triple threat” to healthy parent-child relationships: depression, violence, and addiction. Two years later, Arditti and Few followed up with 10 of the mothers from the original study to add a component of “time” to the prevalent risk factors they identified in the pilot study. They found that maternal distress is characterized by dysfunctional intimate relationships, guilt and worry over strained relationships with their children, health problems, family loss, and economic inadequacy. Development of these explanatory constructs was only the start. The ultimate goal, theoretically, was to affirm the need to integrate the features of maternal distress into reentry program initiatives for inmate mothers. The result of which could help inmate mothers maintain familial ties and pave the way for their successful reentry.
Maintaining Family Ties

Because of the many adverse effects incarceration has on the mother-child relationship, many researchers have theorized that more reentry programs that cultivate building and maintaining these relationships will help mothers successfully reintegrate into the parental role and into society as a whole. Koons et al. (1997) argued that incarcerated women need access to programs that educate them on parenting roles and the developmental needs of children to practice successful parenting approaches. Dowden and Andrews (1999) identified family process variables as the strongest predictors of a female offenders’ success. There is much theoretical evidence that supports the argument that women who assume positive, responsible familial roles have higher rates of post release success than those who do not (Dowden & Andrews, 1999). By addressing the issue of maintaining family ties and supporting parental involvement with a mother who is incarcerated the goal of successful reintegration seems more attainable.

Sandra Enos (2001) used previous studies relating to this topic to lay the foundation for her ethnography of inmate mothers. She sought to examine the ethnic and race differences in pathways to crime, child placement, management of parental self identity and parental influence during imprisonment, and familial expectation for childcare (Enos, 2001). Though Enos’ research goal differentiates from the goal of this work, her extensive review of literature offers a unique perspective to how inmate mothers manage motherhood during incarceration. In her book, *Mothering from the Inside: Parenting in a Women’s Prison*, Enos identifies specific challenges to parenting faced by inmate mothers and how these mothers cope with those challenges. One barrier parenting inmates face when trying to maintain contact with their children is strained
relationships with caregivers. Often times, family members who care for inmates’ children do not consider them to be good parents and will restrict or altogether prevent contact between parent and child. The narratives of her study participants suggest that inmate mothers feel pressure to convince family members and others of their suitability as mothers. Stringer (2009) argued that incarcerated mothers are unable to participate in the day to day tasks mothers typically take part in and this absence and disconnectedness could cause role strain. Berry and Eigneberg (2003) revealed that the incarcerated mothers in their study commonly suffered from role strain.

Enos (2001) argued that incarcerated mothers develop “self-identity” strategies to prove their capabilities as fit parents. Enos (2001) argued that their ability to maintain contact with their children through the caregivers is contingent on the inmate mothers’ success at applying these strategies. Berry and Eigneberg (2003) suggested that role strain, even at reportedly higher levels, does little to diminish the motherhood identity.

In addition to coping strategies that sought to strengthen and maintain the mother’s bonds with their children during incarceration, another strategy unearthed both in previous research as well as in the current study is spirituality. Participants in the present study were residents of a faith-based transitional home so the emergence a “spiritual conversion” was not entirely unforeseeable (Kerley et al., 2011). Kimberly Greer’s (2002) study on how incarcerated mothers manage their emotions revealed that this strategy help address both negative emotions and those emotions that are likely to be suppressed.

Incarcerated mothers strive to maintain their role as parents in a number of ways. Citing separation as one of their most difficult challenges limited contact further
intensifies these difficulties (Baunach, 1985; Hairston, 1991). An effort to maintain constant contact with children through the mail and by way of visitation seemed to be the most common methods. Hairston (2003) contends that although visitation during imprisonment increases the likelihood of successful family reunification, parenting inmates rarely see their children during incarceration. With a correctional system whose visiting policies are inconsistent and restrictive, correctional practices do not always encourage maintaining connections between prisoners and their families (Hairston, 2003). Hairston (2003) reveals that only a small number of prisons offer private visitation to prisoners and their families. In addition to the strict guidelines and practices in corrections, the location of facilities that house female inmates relative to their families serves as barrier to maintaining connections through visitation. Travis et al. (2005) argue that prison facilities that housed women are located, on average, 160 miles away from families of inmates. Christian (2005) was illustrative of the impact of visitation on the families of prisoners, noting the exorbitant amount of time, money, and energy spent on visitation. Visitation does not seem to be the most common way that mothers and families maintain contact. In a review of the BJS statistical data, Travis et al. (2005) revealed that more than half of incarcerated parents reported never receiving a visit from their children. Use of phone calls and mail correspondence were not as common either among incarcerated parents (Travis et al., 2005).

If reentry programming ultimately seeks to decrease the likelihood of recidivism, then empirical research that demonstrates the correlation between positive family ties and successful reintegration is crucial to this issue. Through our in-depth interviews with women whose very role had been threatened due to incarceration, this work will
contribute to a growing body of literature that, until recent years, has all but ignored the damaging effects of incarceration the mother-child relationship. Clearly demonstrated in this review of the literature, there is ample data that supports the claim that positive family relationships are indicative of an offender’s successful re-entry. Maintaining ties with family members has been shown to increase the likelihood of successful reunification and reduce recidivism rates (Hairston, 1998; Travis et al., 2005). The cycle of incarceration and reentry does little to promote public safety and shows very little evidence of rehabilitation. This is why reentry programs that offer services to address the specific needs of this particular population of offenders and provides the appropriate tools to help them successfully reintegrate is vital to plight of recidivism reduction.

METHODS

The findings of this study are drawn from 14 semi-structured interviews with mothers who were residents of The Lovelady Center (TLC), a faith-based transitional center that houses over 400 women and children. TLC was started nearly a decade ago by a local parishioner. The well-known and respected program that exists today began as a small scripture study group. The parishioner teamed up with the state department of corrections to design this transitional program for inmates who were within one year of release. In addition to inmates still under state supervision, TLC also houses women who are there voluntarily for drug and alcohol treatment, are victims of domestic violence, or are economically disadvantaged.¹

For this study, I interviewed mothers who resided at TLC either as a condition of probation or parole or were a part of the Alabama Department of Correction’s (ADOC) ¹ For more information about TLC see www.lovelady.org
Supervised Re-entry Program (SRP). The SRP allows eligible inmates to complete their sentences at transitional facilities like TLC. For these 14 women, separation from their children due to incarceration was one of many challenges. Strict and limited visitation services in prisons, distance from children during incarceration, economic deprivation and lack of family support have all been found to be barriers to maintaining family ties during incarceration (Christian, 2005; Hairston, 2003). For inmate mothers who are reintegrating into society with hopes of desisting from crime and reassuming their parental roles, transitional services offered by TLC provide the tools to help repair their severed relationships with their children and to rebuild their families.

I worked with staff members at TLC to recruit participants. Specifically, I asked staff members to make announcements periodically during the day and to post notices that volunteers were sought who met the requirements and who were willing to discuss their experiences as mothers, inmates, and residents of the facility. The outlined stipulations in the recruitment process were that the women had at least one minor child (under the age of 18) and have spent at least three months in prison. I scheduled interviews with volunteers over a 5-week period coordinating available dates and times with TLC staff. I met with a total of 16 residents of TLC, but only 14 were interviewed. It was found that two of the 16 volunteers did not meet the criteria for the study. All participants in this study had been incarcerated for various types of offenses, mostly drug offences, and their length of time incarcerated varied from 3 to 36 months. Sixty-four percent of the women interviewed were at TLC as a part of the SRP. Twenty-one percent of the women interviewed were at the center voluntarily because of drug issues.
In compliance with Institutional Review Board guidelines, I informed all participants that the interviews would be conducted with a researcher not affiliated with the prison or state department of corrections, would be completely voluntary and confidential, and would not result in any special rewards for participating or punishments for declining participation. I gave all participants oral and written summaries of the research project and asked them to sign a consent form. I conducted all interviews in private areas of the center. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. Each interview was audio-recorded with the permission of the participant. I transcribed all of the interviews and replaced all identifying information (e.g., names) with aliases. I deleted the recordings after checking them for accuracy. To ensure confidentiality, all names presented are aliases assigned by me.

To fully understand what their lives were like from their own perspectives, I chose to use a semi-structured interview format. My goal was to afford participants the opportunity to speak freely about a particular topic or in response to a particular set of questions. Esterberg (2002) contends that this method is useful when the interviewer wants the participants to feel comfortable expressing themselves and giving their accounts in their own words. I found this strategy to be very useful in gaining insight on the participant’s perceptions through unscheduled probing. One example of this that will be illustrated throughout this work is detailed accounts of substance abuse and/or the manufacturing and sale of illegal substances. The initial interview schedule did not include questions on this subject because there was no way for me to know beforehand the significance of drugs in the lives of a majority of the participants.
The purpose of the interviews was to gain a better understanding of what challenges these women face as parents during incarceration, how they cope with being separated from their children, and how services offered by a transitional program helps them to re-establish bonds and strengthen relationships with their children.²

Each interview began with a discussion about the participant’s children. Specifically, I was interested in learning about their children, where they resided currently, and the nature of the mother’s relationship with her children at that time. Interviewees were then asked to describe what events led up to their incarceration and the consequential separation from their children, the obstacles they faced as parents during incarceration and how they coped with those obstacles. The remainder of the interview focused primarily on the women’s perceptions of motherhood, how they viewed themselves as parents prior to, during, and after incarceration and how this transitional program has helped them reintegrate not only back into society, but back into their roles as parents. Each interview ended with a discussion of plans for the future for each resident. This section of the interview gave me insight as to what specific goals these women had set to be better mothers. Their plans for the future also offered information about the role their children and TLC would play in their successful reintegration into society.

I read each transcript to identify common themes. I broadly coded issues that I deemed relevant into categories and my faculty advisor checked interviews for consistency and relevancy in categories. After I coded each major theme I shared my codes with my faculty advisor to ensure consistency in coding and to establish a coherent framework. After these meetings, I then recoded all the interviews to maintain

² See Appendix for copy of interview guide
consistency. This initial broad coding scheme left a great deal of scope for a more detailed analysis directed toward establishing “within issue” variations from one concept to the next. We carried out this analysis by reading the text for each category and, for each one, creating sub-categories that captured distinctions recognized by the participants themselves as important. We continued this style of coding and comparing until we both were satisfied that the developed categories reflected the perspective of the participants.

The racial composition of those interviewed was 79 percent (n=11) White and 21 percent (n=3) African American, which is consistent with the racial make-up of TLC. Half of the women interviewed had been convicted of a drug offense with 64 percent of the interviewees reporting drug abuse prior to incarceration. Only 14 percent of interviewees had been convicted of violent offenses. Over half of interviewees had lost custody of their children either prior to or during their incarceration. Only 36 percent of interviewees had physical custody of at least one minor child at the time of the interview. For those interviewees whose children did not live at TLC, 57 percent of them had at least one minor child who was being cared for by a grandparent. Only 14 percent of the interviewees had children who were in the care of child welfare professionals or had been adopted. Nearly 50 percent of interviewees had children whose grandparents were the primary caregivers while they were incarcerated. Only 14 percent of the interviewees had children whose father was the primary caretaker.

Research Location

TLC, a transitional center for women in Birmingham, Alabama served as the study site. A former hospital in Birmingham’s Northeast side served as home to women
from all across the state who were in transition from prison to freedom. The faith-based program was developed from the ground up inside this 280,000 square foot facility. Some women in this program signed up voluntarily due to obstacles they have faced such as homelessness, substance abuse, and alcohol abuse. Others were referred to the program either as an alternative to serving prison time or as a supervised inmate whose sentence is nearing completion (SRP). TLC also provides assistance to the children of its program participants; a component of the program that makes it unique to many other transitional programs and one that cultivates family reunification. The primary goal of the TLC program is that the women complete all program requirements and graduate within 9 to 12 months. However, it is not unusual for residents to continue to live at TLC once they have completed the program. Many of the Client Representatives that I came in contact with during the interview process were former residents themselves.

Residents are required to stay in the program for at least 6 months while also meeting program criteria. The program works on a point system that allows residents to track their progress by earning points (credits) when accomplishing educational goals, acquiring life skills, and edifying their spirituality. The program consists of four phases and residents complete each phase as a certain period has passed and when they have procured a certain number of points. Those residents who have been sent to TLC by Court Order or are on SRP must follow the guidelines of that particular program and are not required to meet the same criteria as other residents. If they have requirements that conflict with those set by TLC then those requirements supersede that of TLC. The completion of each phase offers more privileges for the women such as cell phone/internet usage, visitation, and weekend passes. Women have the opportunity to
obtain their GED, obtain a state issued ID or Driver’s License, take care of legal matters, help the surrounding community through volunteer work, and obtain employment. For some of the residents, this program allows them the opportunity to serve the remainder of their sentence in an environment where they can regain custody of their children. These women who, in addition to the legal issues that brought them to TLC, may also have psychological issues or a drug and/or alcohol problem.

**INCARCERATED WOMEN’S PRIMARY GOAL**

The women interviewed for this study came from varied backgrounds and criminal histories. Most were incarcerated for drug charges, but others served time for serious property crimes such as theft, burglary, and robbery. Though they all led separate lives before coming to TLC, they had one thing in common—motherhood. Due to their chronic drug use and participation in criminal activities, they had been separated from their children at some point due to incarceration. Despite the various circumstances that led to their incarceration, these women all exhibited a deep desire to reconnect with their children and reestablish their roles as the primary caretaker of their children. In fact, they all claimed that establishing relationships with their children was their current top priority and the most important reason for sticking with the programs at TLC.

Each woman expressed sadness and regret about losing or weakening their relationships with their children. To a person, each exhibited a longing to restore the severed bond between them and their children. Faced with a number of challenges in the re-entry process such as unemployment, limited education, lack of financial resources,
and, in some cases drug abuse issues, their ultimate goal for success was simple—to rebuild their family and be “good” mothers to their children.

The rebuilding of the mother-child bond served as their motivation for rehabilitation and their reason for seeking self-improvement and attaining their life’s goals. For many of these women, their children’s fathers were not actively involved in either their own lives or that of their children. Thus, in their eyes, their children had only one parent to depend on. According to them, being sent to prison because of their poor choices meant they failed as mothers. Of the 14 women interviewed, all stated they believed they had not fulfilled their obligations as mothers and were prepared to change this fact. Meredith, who had been at TLC for two months, talked about the obstacles she faced as a mother during the three years she spent at Tutwiler Prison for Women. Though she declined to answer any questions about what led her to prison, she did state that she has never had an issue with substance abuse. She shared that she lost custody of her children prior to going to prison and did not have much support from her family. When asked why she did not think she was ever a “good” mother to her five children, she said, “I feel like a good mother will do whatever for her kids’ happiness and I wouldn’t do that. I feel like I am the opposite of what a good mother is.”

She went on to express that simply not being there for her children is why she believed she was not a “good” mother. She recalled the guilt and shame she felt about her absence from her children’s lives and trying to make up for it in other ways while she resided at TLC. “My son was having a hard time in school and getting in trouble and his dad said to quit sending him stuff. Buying him stuff was all I had to offer because I
wasn’t there physically.” Meredith further claimed that she has taken ownership of her mistakes and was working everyday to be a better mother to her children.

Kristen, who was sent to TLC on the Supervised Reentry Program, claimed she was making great strides to be reunited with her two children. She spent six months in prison for theft and drug charges and was now seeking substance abuse treatment. Admitting her failures, she had this to say about when she came to the realization that her drug addiction was hurting her children and ultimately made the decision to change:

I had gotten to the point where I didn’t want to live anymore. I had done walked so far out of their [her children] lives and had gotten so far gone on meth that I couldn’t see how much they really needed me. I’m seeing that now. In prison, you can see it too because you’re forced to be clean. It’s not your choice. Once you get clean, you’re like wow. I can see. That’s what motivated me to get clean and stay clean; to do rehab.

These women claim that every decision they have made and continue to make to rehabilitate, whether it was seeking drug treatment or counseling, furthering their education, paying their debt to society or learning a trade, was made in the interest of their children. These are all tangible ways to show, not simply tell, their children they were serious in their commitment to be better mothers. Janet, a mother of three, was sent to TLC after serving seventeen months in prison. She spoke of her methamphetamine addiction, her extensive criminal history, and having her parental rights stripped away. Her three children now live with their maternal grandmother and this is what she had to say about her relationship with her kids:
Our relationship is strained but we do miss each other. He [son] really doesn’t want to be with my mom. My eleven year old wears his emotions on his sleeve and has some behavioral issues too. I was not the mother I should have been.

She continued to speak about a very dark time in her life when she was consumed by her addiction. She said, “I tried to be a good mom and I failed horribly. I chose me over my kids.” She contended that before coming to TLC she was never able to stay sober long enough to focus on being a mother. Janet spent seven months in jail for manufacturing prior to serving her last sentence. After remaining sober for seven months while incarcerated, she stated that she relapsed just six hours after her release. Janet seemed to have confronted her failures and realized that to rebuild her relationship with her children she needed to get treatment for her addiction. Serving the remainder of her sentence at TLC where she could get the proper treatment, in her mind, would serve as proof to her children that she was serious this time about making a change. She had this to say about her strides to be a better mother to her kids:

Yes, I feared I’d lose their love. My oldest son tells me he hates me. I believe him. He may not need me, but I need him. I tell him that I know it’s my fault. I am not the best mom or the perfect mom, but I am working on it.

Determined not to let her son down again, Anna noted:

[My son] is very open about the stuff he feels and has told me if I ever use any drug of any kind ever again he’s out of my life for good. He’s very serious; he means that. He’s been hurt and let down and he’s like this is your last shot with me mom. I think that’s motivating to me, but it also motivates me knowing I have a chance to completely be his mom and that’s all he wants.
Challenges Due to Incarceration

I asked participants various questions that sought to identify the challenges they faced as mothers while incarcerated. Depending on the length of their sentences and the number of times they had been incarcerated, many reported having little contact with their child(ren) in the past year; with a small number of them having had no contact with one or more of their children in over a year. For those women who reported having little contact with their children while serving time, lack of family support seemed to be one of the most common reasons. Family members were the primary caretakers of the participant’s children in a majority of the cases (86%). For these women, the nature of their relationship with that particular family member was the biggest indicator of how much contact they had with their children while incarcerated. Those women, who reported having a good relationship with their child’s caregiver, also reported more frequent communication with their children during incarceration. Strained relationships with children’s caretakers inadvertently caused strain on the mother’s relationship with her own children. Women who reported having a somewhat turbulent relationship with the child’s caregiver reported having little contact with their children while they were incarcerated. Many of the women know all too well what this feels like and argue that they were striving to prove themselves to their children and their children’s caretakers.

Infrequent contact with their children for months at a time caused a great deal of stress on the mother-child bond. Women with younger children expressed difficulty with this lack of contact because they believed that their children might think they had abandoned them or did not want to be with them. These women seemed to use mail correspondence as their primary mode of communicating with their children while in
prison. Karen, a long time methamphetamine user, who served time for distribution had this to say about rebuilding a relationship with her 13 year old son while incarcerated:

I wrote my child all the time. Of course, I didn’t get anything back but that was okay. My mom was giving him the letters. I didn’t know that at the time, but I was rebuilding a relationship with him through the mail. I didn’t know if he knew, but I wasn’t going to stop writing. I figured I had wasted enough of his life not telling him I loved him and appreciated him and was glad that God had given him to me. I didn’t want to waste another day so I wrote him often.

Like Karen, those participants who reported a history of substance abuse seemed to suffer the most from strained relationships with their child’s caregiver. Most of these women reported years of drug use, some even used while pregnant. Because the caregivers (grandparents, fathers, aunts, etc.) were aware of the drug use, it is conceivable that they intentionally minimized the mother’s contact with her children for the welfare of the child. This notion is consistent with previous research, like Hairston (2003) who contends that incarcerated parents report limited contact with their children and often assign blame to their strained relationship with the caretaker.

Previous research supports frequent contact between parents and children during incarceration for the potential positive effects it can have during reunification; however, most parents do not see their children during incarceration (Hairston, 2003). This was the case for Jennifer, who had not seen or talked to her two eldest kids in several years. She shared that she carries the burden of guilt for not being able to be a part of her children’s lives. Jennifer’s road to prison started with her substance abuse. She reported that her criminal activities such as theft and burglary were all done to support her drug habit and
she spoke about how that drug habit forever scarred her eldest son in this shocking revelation:

My oldest son has cerebral palsy because of all the drugs I did while I was pregnant. That was really hard for me. This is the first time I have really tried to be apart of their lives and they (caretakers) are making it hard. I really am trying to be a better mother.

Kristen, with a similar criminal and drug history, seemed more optimistic about being given the opportunity to rebuild her relationship with her children. Her relationships with her children’s caregivers seemed to be less strained than Jennifer’s. However, she still felt an enormous amount of pressure to stay sober and out of trouble. According to her, her mother and ex-husband were not going to make getting them back an easy feat. Her family supported her efforts to reconnect with her children, but not without some tough love. This is what she had to say about the ultimatum given to her by her children’s caregivers, “My mother and my ex-husband tell me all the time that if I use again, it’s my last chance.”

These women all agreed that drug abuse severed their bonds with their children long before incarceration and caregivers wanted to see an effort on the mother’s part to stay sober before she could re-enter the child’s life. The Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that only 1 in 5 female inmates in custody in our state prisons receive treatment for substance abuse (Mumola, 2000). Prison, as women in this study described it, was not a drug treatment center and a person’s true test of sobriety comes when they make the conscious decision to stay clean after prison. All the women who reported drug abuse issues also reported that maintaining sobriety after prison was for the sake of their
children and a part of their efforts to prove themselves worthy of motherhood again. Participants with a substance abuse history seemed to believe that coming to TLC was a way to demonstrate to the courts, probation officers, DHR, caretakers and their children their willingness to become rehabilitated. Transitioning to TLC whether court-mandated on a Substance Abuse Program (SAP) or voluntary was a way for these women to seek treatment as well as make other strides to rebuild their relationships with their children.

Sixty-four percent of participants reported a history of substance abuse. Diana, a 30 year-old long time methamphetamine user had been at TLC for three months when I sat down with her. She held her three month-old daughter as we talked. There was a sad tone in her voice when she talked about being a mother. Diana explained that she was the mother of two little girls but had not seen her eldest daughter in over a year. She lost custody of her when she was three years old. Now six years old, that child lives with Diana’s parents. Diana was not the only mother in our study in this situation. Only 36 percent of participants reported living with their children prior to incarceration. This percentage is significantly less than the national average. Previous research shows that 73 percent of incarcerated mothers in state prisons and 50 percent in federal prison report living with their children prior to incarceration (Banauch, 1985; Greenfeld & Snell, 1999; Mumola, 2000).

Diana claimed that her strained relationship with her parents because of her drug abuse has made rebuilding a bond with her first-born child much more challenging. Recalling her childhood and her fears about the quality of her daughter’s child-rearing, she explained:
Well when she was a baby I was afraid she wouldn’t remember me and that she wouldn’t know me when I got out. I knew I’d get out someday. My family is not supportive at all. My mom and dad that have custody of her are really hateful people and they didn’t raise me and my sister in a good way. I’m afraid they are raising her the same way. I worried about what she was around. When you get sober you think clearly and when I was in jail I really started realizing and worrying if she was taken care of.

Even mothers who reported having a strong family support system and willing caretakers faced difficulties maintaining contact with their children. Hairston (2003) found that a number of barriers, including economic barriers can prevent families from staying connected during incarceration. In addition to economic barriers, participants also identified strict prison regulations as a major challenge to maintaining contact with their children during incarceration. Because of these guidelines, caretakers and children were forced to endure harsh and invasive security practices to visit an inmate. Most mothers, whose caregivers were willing to bring the children to visit, declined frequent visits for the sake of the children. Jennifer told the story of the one and only visit she received from her grandparents and daughter while she was an inmate at Julia Tutwiler Prison for Women serving a fourteen month sentence:

When I was in prison, they came one time. It is such a long and hard process to get it approved. When they came to see me, my grandfather’s license was expired so I didn’t get to see them.

Such limits to the prison bureaucracy were common and hampered many plans of visitations (see Christian, 2005). Kristen, who had not seen her children in nearly eight
months, recalled the one and only visit she received while incarcerated. When asked about the visit, she stated, “Yes, they come, but the Lieutenant turned them away at the back gate because they didn’t bring their birth certificates.”

Many of the women expressed feeling that the humiliation their loved ones had to endure just to sit in dirty, crowded visiting rooms were not worth the hassle. Some participants talked about the intrusive searches and rude treatment their families experienced just to bring children to a place that is not very suitable for young children to begin with. And, for a many of the mothers, the process of leaving their children again once the visit ended was even more painful than not seeing them at all. Taylor, who spent two years in prison, had this to say when asked about one of the few visits she received while incarcerated:

Towards the end of my sentence, my aunt finally brought my son to see me. I was at Montgomery Work Release at the time and the stuff they go through there just to visit you … the searches, the lines they have to wait in, the rules that are put on them because of my mistakes, you know. It is hard being away from him, but to me it was harder when he would visit and then leave … having to let go again.

Because of the rural locations of some prison facilities, many caregivers had to drive long distances for very short visits. These long distances and even the high cost of telephone calls in lieu of visits placed economic hardship on some caregivers who were already under financial strain as they took on the role of primary provider for the children of these incarcerated mothers (Christian, 2005).

In some cases, women with multiple children reported that their children were split amongst two or three relatives. Though this arrangement may have lessened the
impact of financial responsibilities for the caretakers, these type situations created even more challenges for mothers. These mothers, some of them with very limited family support and resources, would then have to collaborate with multiple caretakers for visits, phone calls and mail correspondence. Forty-three percent of the women reported having multiple children who resided in different places. Among these women, two reported having children who resided in a different state. Grandparents were the primary caretakers for at least one child in most cases (57%), while fathers ranked second as the primary caretaker (29%).

Kristen’s children had been split up but she was fortunate enough to maintain good relations with her children’s caretakers. Though she had a history of drug abuse and a criminal record, Kristen reported that they remained supportive of her because of her efforts to seek help and get better. Kristen’s case seemed to defy the odds. Others in similar situations like Jennifer and Susan did not appear to be as fortunate and reported the anticipation of much difficulty reconnecting with their children. Susan’s three children were being raised by their maternal grandmother. Susan reported having lost custody in 2010 after the Department of Human Resources (DHR) opened a case on her. Of the 14 women interviewed, Susan’s criminal history was the most extensive. She reported having three felonies on her record which included convictions for possession and for burglary.

Again, the success of these arrangements was contingent upon the nature of the mother’s relationships with those caretakers (Hairston, 2003). For every case where the father was reported to be the caretaker of one or more children, the mothers also reported having a good relationship with them. However, in cases where the paternal or maternal
grandparents acted as the children’s custodians, 44% of them reported difficulty maintaining a connection with their children because of the strained relationship with the caretakers. Even more challenging were the situations where mother’s lost custody of their children either prior to or during incarceration. A small percentage of women reported having at least one child in the state’s custody (14%). Though minor children are allowed to reside with mothers at TLC, only a small number of participants (21%) reported having physical custody of their children at that time.

Jennifer lost custody of her two eldest children five years prior being sent to TLC on SRP. Jennifer talked about her 10 year struggle with substance abuse and admitted that her habit severed her relationship with her two eldest kids whom she has had no contact with. She recounted that dark time in her life when she lost everything:

DHR got involved when my daughter was 9 months old. At the time, I was pregnant with my oldest son. DHR took them from me because I did drugs while I was pregnant. They (kids) went and lived with their grandparents from that day on.

Jennifer’s two eldest children are now being raised by their paternal grandparents who will not allow them to have any contact with her. When I asked Jennifer if she ever feared that she would lose her children’s love, she said:

Yes, I have and I still do. I’ve been away from them for so long. They do not know me and everything that they have heard (about me) has not been good. Even though I did drugs, I did what I could for my kids. But actions speak louder than words and maybe one day I can speak to their grandparents and tell them how I appreciate them. You really don’t notice when your life is consumed by drugs.
Telephone calls, visitations and letters are all methods that these mothers used to stay informed about what was going on in their children’s lives from their various activities to their progress in school (Hairston, 2003). At TLC, visitation and phone usage guidelines were less strict than that of correctional institutions, but still the women were subject to approval by TLC staff and privileges were earned as they progressed through the program. While the program encourages the reunion of mothers with their children, re-entry participants must meet certain requirements before children can come and reside at the center. For many of these women, residence at TLC was temporary as they worked to complete prison sentences, fight drug addictions, and gain financially stability. Their goal to ultimately re-unite with their children was still at the forefront of their efforts to improve themselves and establish a solid foundation for raising a family and ultimately becoming what they defined as a “good” mother.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A GOOD MOTHER?

As women who desperately wanted to be mothers to their children again, these women were charged with the task to confront their failures, evaluate what they did wrong, and work towards mending broken relationships. While they all considered themselves mothers prior to going to prison, being sent to prison disrupted their relationship with their children. These women believed that in order for them to rebuild and restore those broken relationships, they had to make every effort to become “good” mothers to their children. In the interview, women were asked to give their definition of what makes a “good” mother. This seemed to be one of the most thought-provoking questions for the women. These women come from different backgrounds and their definitions of what
makes a “good” mother could be culturally-specific. Thus, it is important to understand how women in their positions define being a “good” mother. When asked to describe the qualities of what they thought made a “good” mother, participants gave very similar answers. The common themes found when participants described for qualities of a “good” mother included: (1) physical presence of a mother who (2) provides emotional and mental support to her child by the expression of her love for them and by (3) being a provider.

Physical Presence

There was agreement amongst the participants that “good” mothers, first and foremost, have a prominent, physical presence in their children’s lives. Many women stated that being a “good” mother simply means “being there” for your kids. From the various answers I received, I interpreted “being there” to mean that the mother is the primary caregiver of her children. The mother should have legal and physical custody of her children, she should be responsible for them on a day to day basis, and she should play an active role in their lives.

As described by the women, being there for your kids includes things such as dropping them off at school, tucking them in bed at night, attending their school functions and extra-curricular activities, and preparing and eating meals with them. This was true for many women as they openly expressed that being physically separated from their children as a result of their bad choices is what made them “bad mothers.” For some, this separation occurred prior to their incarceration due to drug abuse and/or involvement in criminal activity. In such cases, children often lived with relatives and those parents were present in their children’s lives on a part-time basis. Twenty-nine percent of women
reported that their children resided with other family members prior to their incarceration. Moreover, each of these women also reported substance abuse issues. Susan, a mother of two, reflected on a time in her life before drugs and her run-ins with law enforcement that she was in her children’s lives and considered herself a “good” mother. In her words, “Before I got hooked on meth, I worked two jobs. I worked at school in the lunch room. I took my kids to school every day. I got ‘em up, fixed ‘em breakfast, got ‘em dressed. I did everything.”

In 14% of cases, the mothers played active roles in their children’s lives and were physically present; however they did not assume physical custody of their children. In these cases, the children lived with relatives and the mothers would visit and even provide for them in other ways, but did not reside in the same household. These women reported leaving kids with relatives while they “hustled” on the street for money or drugs or both. Some explained that in those times, they still considered themselves “good” mothers and felt their actions were justified. The time spent away from their children was necessary to provide for them. One of the mothers had this to say when asked if she thought she was being a “good” mother when she would leave her kids to go get high: “I made sure he [her son] was fed and once he went to sleep I would go out and get into trouble.” Kristen, whose involvement with her kids was nearly non-existent for most of their lives, tells how she justified her absence: “I always told myself they were better off without me. I’m not good enough for them.” In hindsight their perceptions seemed to have changed dramatically. As they reflect on those times, it was apparent that not being there was not being a “good” mother regardless of the reason. Tara, who sold drugs for a living made the following statement about being a “good” mother to her four children:
When I was out there selling drugs, I wasn’t there with them. Then I wasn’t there when I got locked up. It made me feel bad because I thought while I was out there I could have found a real job and do things that a mother should have done.

**Emotional and Mental Support**

Most of the women pointed out that “good” mothers also provide mental and emotional support to their children. The participants agreed that showing your kids that you love them is a necessity. Anna, when asked to describe the qualities of a good mother gave this description: “a nurturer, provider and guardian.” Offering emotional support to their child meant giving them attention and showing a genuine interest in their lives. Mothers now tried to offer their kids encouragement when they feel inadequate and give their children praise when they accomplish various goals.

As illustrated in the following narratives, these women also believed that “good” mothers set a good example for their children, give them advice on how to handle different situations, teach them right from wrong, and discipline them when necessary. Julie, a mother of four, gave this description of what a “good” mother should do, “Be there for your kids. Know their wants and needs. Discipline them because they need it; not whipping them but disciplining them in other ways.” Erica describes what a “good” mother should do for her children, she adds “take care of them and be a mother to them and teach them to be respectful.” According to many of the participants, “good” mothers showed their children that they care and are concerned with every aspect of their lives. For women who have been physically separated from their children due to incarceration, it was virtually impossible to offer their children this type of support on a constant basis.
They now sought to change this fact. Maintaining connections with children, as noted above, was one of the most challenging aspects of parental incarceration. Participants expressed extreme difficulty managing the separation and learning how to continue functioning as a parent until they could be reunited with their children. Anna, a resident at TLC who has graduated from the program and now has custody of her 12 year old son gave this description of what makes a “good” mother:

Love them, encourage them, support them and be there for them and to be a good example to them because it doesn’t matter what we say or do, what they see you do is ultimately what they are going to do. And be happy with them. Being honest with our child and teaching your child to be honest no matter what.

Financial Responsibility

According to the participants, a “good” mother must also be a provider. I interpreted from the various responses that this meant creating a safe and secure place for their children to live and ensuring that they have everything they needed. A “good” mother provided essentials for her child’s well-being, gave them stability, and assumed responsibility for their basic needs such as clothing, food, shelter. That being said, most of the participants in this study said they were not “good” mothers prior to going to prison. Many of them reported that their children were being cared for by family members prior to their incarceration and that they were not providing for them financially. Some expressed giving their children to trusted family members was their attempt to avoid exposing their child to their various criminal activities and/or their drug addictions. They believed that protecting them from the truth was in the best interest of
the child even if that meant excommunicating themselves from their lives altogether. Jenny, whose two children live with relatives, offered the following answer to what she thinks the role of a “good” mother encompasses:

Main caregiver- a person that shows love and attention. Show them that when they fall and get hurt, there is somebody there for them or when they do something good, you praise ‘em. I really don’t know. To take care of them, put a roof over their head. Be their best friend and mother at the same time.

Jenny chose to live apart from her children before going to prison because of her substance abuse issues. She said that she did not provide for them in any capacity. Her 14 year old lived with Jenny’s mother, while her 9 year old lived with her ex-husband. In Jenny’s description she, in so many words, identified all three themes of what makes a “good” mother. Sara, who spent ten years away from her daughter, gave a much simpler and broader answer to what makes a “good” mother, “A mother should always be there.” Jenny, like Sara, struggled with substance abuse issues and those issues led to her to other criminal activities and, ultimately, away from her children. Neither of them was “there” for their children. Jenny and Sara, like a majority of the participants, gave very similar if not identical answers when asked to describe the role of a mother and then again when later asked to describe what makes a “good” mother. These women did not appear to perceive differences between the two which suggests that there is no apparent in-between or gray-area in what makes a mother and what makes “good” mother as these mothers see it. I also observed that these women did not seem pressured at all to portray themselves as “ideal” mothers. Most of them admitted not considering themselves “good” mothers even
prior to their incarceration, but they now sought to change this status and eventually become mothers they could define as good.

HOW TO BE A “GOOD” MOTHER

In aspiring to be “good” mothers to their children, these women set specific life goals and made conscious and purposeful decisions to change. Their narratives seemed to indicate that they plan to desist from crime and/or seek substance abuse treatment, maintain their faith, pursue higher education and obtain employment in an attempt to be “good” mothers. Displaying what seemed to be a deep desire to change, most of them seemed very optimistic about the idea of reestablishing good relations with their children. They believed strongly that they could rebuild those severed relationships and become better mothers by focusing on self-improvement through the goals that they have set. Simply speaking about the desire for change is often not sufficient for actual change. Recognizing this, many of the women made clear, practical plans for accomplishing their goals. TLC played an important role in helping these women to accomplish those goals as the program is designed so that these women have access to substance abuse treatment, educational courses, vocational training and employment assistance, and a plethora of religious-based resources.

Education and Employment

Women inmates returning to society are under an enormous amount of financial strain as most of them leave prison with a significant amount of debt (Brown & Bloom, 2009). Upon their release, many inmates are still responsible for fines they may have
owed prior to incarceration as well as restitution owed to the victims of their crimes and any welfare payments made to their children while they were incarcerated (Brown & Bloom, 2009). In addition, parolees are usually required to seek and maintain employment as a condition of their parole. Thus, they recognized that they were under pressure to reassume financial responsibility if they were to regain relationships (especially custody) for their children.

Re-entry programs like the one offered at TLC aided in minimizing the impact of these responsibilities on the mother while she was transitioning from prison to home. Even with the assistance that is offered by these programs, these women expressed a desire to do whatever was necessary to seek and maintain employment; not just for them, but for their children. When asked about future plans, every participant mentioned either getting a good job or furthering their education. Anna, already a TLC program graduate worked as a client representative for the Center and expressed her desire to continue working in ministry to help other women like her. She also mentioned studying to become a counselor and added this, “I plan to finish my degree by the first of next year.”

Seeking a job after prison was challenging and frustrating for these women, which is not unusual for women in their positions. These frustrations were even more pronounced for those who lacked adequate education and work experience. Though work history and education level was not formally obtained in the interview process, it can be inferred from the interview narratives that few of these women held legitimate jobs prior to prison or had reached an educational level that surpassed a high school diploma. In 21% of cases, participants admitted the distribution of illegal drugs was their primary source of income before prison and is also what led to their arrests and convictions. Beth
was convicted of manufacturing a controlled substance. At the time, she was addicted to meth and reported that she began manufacturing it to support her habit. With little legitimate work experience and three children to support, Beth faced many challenges to make a life change. She expressed that her biggest challenge at that point had been getting her other two kids back. Her two eldest children were legally adopted by her mother. She stated that she planned to begin a career in ministry to support her family and eventually hoped to have all three of her children residing with her. The idea that job skills and an education were essential in building a strong foundation to support their families seemed to resonate in the minds these women.

Julie, a mother of four, had only been at TLC for two months at the time of our interview. She had served 10 months in prison on a robbery charge. While in prison, she decided exactly what profession she wanted to work in. Her first goal was to obtain her GED. She indicated that after that she plans to enroll in a junior college and study to become a Certified Nursing Assistant and work in a nursing home. She chose this profession because of her love and compassion for the elderly. Like Julie, Laura was also a mother of four and also had plans to get her GED and go to college. She had aspirations of studying cosmetology and one day opening a salon with her daughter who is also a hair stylist. Whether these employment goals were realistic is uncertain. Regardless, these women still expressed hope that they would be able to secure stable employment and make it easier to be with their children.
Criminal Desistance and Sobriety

For those who blamed their deviance on lack of financial resources, desistance from crime and employment after imprisonment seemed to be more challenging than ever. Those women convicted of property crimes contend that their deviant behavior was done to support their family. In other words, they “did what they had to do.” The chances of these women finding legitimate employment outside of low-wage, temporary, or part-time employment were slim; this was especially true for those without a 12th grade education and those with little to no work experience prior to incarceration (Brown & Bloom, 2009). Mary’s case seemed to be illustrative of this phenomenon. Only 34 years old, Mary had recently come to the center when I interviewed her. She was released from prison nearly two years earlier after serving a ten year sentence for robbery. Pregnant and alone, Mary expressed just wanting to be given the opportunity to be a mother to her 14 year old daughter who she has only seen twice in the past twelve years. Her daughter has lived with Mary’s parents since she went to prison. Because of Mary’s drug addiction and the problems it caused her family, Mary did not have any support from them. Unable to work because of complications during this pregnancy, Mary would be living on the streets if not for TLC. Before prison, Mary struggled with an addiction to meth and began manufacturing it to support her habit. Drugs and a poor choice of friends is what ultimately led to her arrest and conviction at the age of twenty-two. Her desire at this point was to maintain her sobriety so that she could rebuild her relationship with her daughter and be the best mother she can be for the child she’s expecting.

Laura, a young mother whose criminal record included charges for manufacturing and selling illegal substances was adamant about her plans to not only further her
education, but to also “stay out of trouble.” Laura was sent to TLC as an inmate on the Supervised Reentry Program (SRP) and is only at the center until she reaches her End of Sentence (EOS) date. She had this to say about what she plans to do once she leaves TLC: “Get out and just do the right thing; not sell anymore drugs. That’s far out of my mind.”

Many of the women interviewed seemed remorseful of their mistakes that ultimately separated them from their children. No matter what their respective motives were at the time, each one expressed regret for not making a change before it was too late. For those women who believed that their substance abuse issues ultimately led to their involvement in criminal activity, it can be argued sobriety and desistance go hand and hand in these cases. Kristen explained, “I chose to come to TLC ‘cause I told them I don’t think I could hit the streets when I leave prison and just be clean.” Kristen further elaborated on what motivates her to stay clean:

I still fear I’m gone mess up. If I mess up, it looks bad. It looks like I’m not trying and I’m not worried about coming home. So when I think about how some people when they relapse, I’m like how do you do that? You have so much to live for and you’re going to lose so much. That’s why, when I talk to my daughter, I can honestly tell her that I’m not going to do drugs again.

She explained the strength of the hold that her addiction had on her life. We discussed times in her past when she would lie to her daughter to go get high and she recalled how it made her feel: “Like a douche-bag. Just two inches tall, but my addiction was more important at that time. You don’t think about it. That was the main reason I stayed high so that I didn’t have to think about it.” This quote is reminiscent of how Kristen, and
other participants in similar situations, made sense of their bad choices in the past and how their transformation was centered on their recovery.

Spirituality

TLC, being a faith-based program, is a place that encourages its residents to live Christ-Centered lives while also empowering them to grow and make themselves better. This program gives women assistance and seeks to help make their transitions back to society (and their families) easier. Many of the participants expressed being attracted to this program because of its faith-based initiatives. They had hopes that the program would help ease their transition back to society and equip them with the tools they need for successful reentry. Some women believed that the structure of the program, which emphasized attendance of church, daily devotion, bible study and classes, helped them to study the word of God and stay focused. The belief that anything was possible when you have faith in God gave them the strength to keep pushing forward despite their situations. Some did not have any family support and the loneliness and feelings of inadequacy experienced during incarceration was only cured by their belief in a divine plan. The shame and guilt felt by these women who spent most of their lives dealing with substance abuse issues, domestic violence, economic disparity, and deeply rooted family problems only intensified while they were incarcerated. Upon release, most of them would be returning to the same situations that were partially, if not entirely responsible for the path that led them to jail in the first place. Some stated that they felt unworthy of love and forgiveness by their children and families before TLC. Spirituality gave them a sense of
self-worth and importance. Broke, alone, uneducated, and unskilled, spirituality gave them hope for a better future.

When asked how they overcame some of the obstacles they faced in prison, most women stated prayer was their escape and huge part of the healing process. Most notably it was those women who spoke of strained family relations who spoke of spirituality as their coping mechanism in prison and a necessity for a successful future. Diana, the 30 year old mother of two, had this to say about her faith in God: “When I got saved I knew that my daughter would be okay and that God would protect her and things would be okay. I knew one day he would reunite us.” Anna, the program graduate mentioned earlier in this section, spoke of her period of enlightenment in prison:

I figured out that pretty much it was me and God while I was in there. I didn’t have family support. I had burned all those bridges. I believe that was the best thing for me. That tough love finally woke me up to my need for God. God was working that all out for me.

Carol spent 6 months in jail for a theft charge. She also suffered from substance abuse issues and planned to bring her two children to TLC to live with her. She had this to say about making a decision to seek substance abuse treatment at TLC after her release:

That is why I chose to come here; because this program is faith-based. I was born and raised as a Christian. I knew that the only way I would make it would be to get my relationship right with the Lord.
THE ROLE OF THE LOVELADY CENTER (TLC)

Built on the principle of tough love combined with unending support and encouragement, the participants seemed to agree that TLC offered them something the criminal justice system, family, friends, drugs and alcohol did not and that is hope. Not restricted by bars, guards, or fences, the residents controlled their fate and this challenged them to do what was right not because they were made to, but by personal choice. Kristen added, “My main goal is to stay clean for them [kids]; for me, but for them too.” The strict, six to twelve month program required residents to attend mandatory classes, pitch in and help with the daily operations of TLC, and participate in counseling and bible study classes. It is also required that residents get substance abuse treatment and submit to random drug tests. Because most of the participants of this study have struggled with substance abuse, getting the proper treatment after prison was the first step in putting their lives back together. Many of the correctional facilities in Alabama for women are not equipped to offer substance abuse treatment and counseling so, for these women, that habit still remained once they were released from prison. Residents were exposed to a number of resources and an overwhelming amount of support to combat their addictions.

The program held them accountable for their own sobriety. They were not forced to stay clean; it was a choice and with that choice would come reward or consequences. The possession, use, and/or distribution of drugs, alcohol, or illegal paraphernalia at the center could result in suspended program privileges. By use of a point system residents were rewarded when they met certain requirements or obtained specific goals. This same system also punished residents by the removal of certain privileges if they did not progress as they should or if they failed to meet mandatory requirements. Though not an
objective of the program or a frequent occurrence, dismissal from the program could result from what staff would consider major infractions. This was not the case for any of the participants, even those who had previously resided at TLC.

When asked what role TLC played in helping them to accomplish their goals, most participants agreed that transitioning to TLC from prison gave them another chance at life and at motherhood. TLC provided the women with essentials for everyday living: food, housing, employment, education, substance abuse treatment, and counseling. Many did not have a home to return to, a job or other source of income, or the support of family. They believed TLC could be an avenue to help them succeed at whatever goals they set for their lives. Laura had this to say about what she hopes to accomplish after leaving TLC: “The person I have become since being here [TLC] is my motivation for staying clean. I want to go back to my parent’s [house] and eventually get custody of my son.”

With their primary focus on rebuilding the mother-child bond, TLC seemed to be the ideal setting for these women to better themselves and eventually be mothers to their children again; especially those battling addiction or lacking family and financial support. Though providing the essentials made life easier for them to focus on making and maintaining a life change, the women often credited TLC for the faith-based courses, church services, and Bible study sessions. Residents also credited TLC for how it encourages and fosters support through fellow and former residents.

Kristen provided her account of TLC’s role in her life change stating, “I chose to come to this program because it’s faith-based. I was born and raised as a Christian. I knew that the only way I would make it would be to get my relationship right with the
Lord.” Anna claimed that her most dramatic change came from the classes she’s taken at TLC. She explained, “Those classes helped me learn a lot. They helped me realize that I was wrong and not to blame everybody else. They also taught me the steps I could take to make things better.” Justina claimed that this program is the only reason she has remained drug free for the longest period in nearly 10 years. She noted that “This place (TLC) is more about God and that is better” than other similar programs. She went on to say that, “I have done the 12 Step Program and it did nothing. I have gotten so much more out of this program and I have only been here like two months. God has moved so much in my life.” Justina expressed her love for attending classes but went on to add this about why she diligently stuck with the program, “I attend mostly biblical classes and I get drug tested once a month, but that’s not why my life has changed. It is because I have God in my life. I can’t go back.”

The Director of TLC contends that Faith is essential to the center’s mission. Most participants arrived at TLC with the expectation that they could better themselves before reuniting with their families and this expectation seemed to be rooted in the emphasis on spirituality at TLC. Women who society may label as a(n) ex-con, thief, bad mother, or drug addict seem to reject those social stigmas and believe that they could change those identities. Societal parameters for change seemed to be less of a concern for these women because of their spiritual teachings. Many admitted to struggling daily with their faith and their bad habits. They believed that by taking an active role in changing and maintaining a relationship with God, they would succeed.

A spiritual transformation was not the only observed benefit of this program. The overwhelming support offered to these women through staff, fellow residents, and
representatives of the various organizations that partner with the center, was also apparent in the narratives. The women at TLC are each assigned a case manager upon entering the program and that manager also acts as a mentor and life coach—essentially holding their hand from start to program completion. Most participants seemed to find this aspect of the program very beneficial.

DISCUSSION

Research on female offenders and reentry has increased over the last two decades as the female prison population has risen. More and more research examining the impact of incarceration on parenting women is emerging. This study takes an alternative approach to understanding the difficulties faced by incarcerated mothers to maintain ties with their children through accounts of their lived experiences. This study considers the effects of incarceration on inmate mothers and their relationships with their children and also seeks to understand the role of reentry programs like TLC in the helping these mothers to overcome obstacles and successfully reintegrate with their families and into the community. In order to gain more insight on how incarceration effects a mother’s relationship with her children, we sought to accomplish three goals: (1) to shed light on the unique challenges faced by mothers during incarceration and upon their reentry back into society; and (2) to identify what motivates incarcerated women to make a decision to change and (3) assess how transitional programs aid in the reunification process.

As the statistics have shown, most women in prison are mothers and mothers, more often than fathers are the primary caretakers of children. Participants of this study expressed that while they were incarcerated, maintaining contact with their children was
the biggest challenge they faced. Consistent with Christian’s (2005) findings, participants identified the following factors as impediments to maintaining close connections with their children during incarceration: strict prison regulations, location of prison facilities, expensive phone calls. In this study, a strained relationship with caregivers was also found to be one of the many difficulties these mothers faced trying to maintain ties with their children. Some mothers noted that they maintained contact with children via mail by writing them frequently and sending cards. They contended that frequent visitation and use of the telephone, though not cost-effective for some families, also served as a way to maintain ties with their children during incarceration. 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 a primary goal of rebuilding their relationship with their children, these women came to this program seeking help to accomplish this. With goals ranging from furthering their education to receiving vocational training, getting a job, finding housing and seeking treatment for drug addiction, these mothers claim that their efforts are to ultimately restore their relationships with their children. Their narratives indicated that they are actively seeking education, employment, sobriety, and spirituality with the larger goal of becoming “good” mothers.

In order for these women to overcome challenges and cope with separation during incarceration, they employed several coping mechanisms that also served as avenues by which they would accomplish their ultimate goal of reuniting with and being good mothers to their children. Maintaining their spirituality was one way many of the participants stated that they were able to deal with the strain on their relationship with
their children. With the belief in a “bigger purpose” and a “higher power”, many incarcerated mothers feel empowered to regain control over their lives and preserve the mother-child bond (Easterling, 2012). Participants of this study all identified spirituality as a strong social force in their efforts to change. This declaration could be partially attributed to the fact that these women reside in a faith-based transitional facility. However, further research would be needed to support this claim.

In addition to spirituality, participants identified other ways in which they overcame challenges during incarceration. Because a majority of study participants struggled with substance abuse, seeking treatment for their addiction served as tangible proof to their children and families of their efforts to change. These mothers had hoped that by overcoming their addictions and maintaining their sobriety they would be given a chance to be good mothers to their children. Much like spirituality, sobriety symbolized change for these women. That change opened up the door for success and minimized the likelihood of them regressing to past behaviors.

What Works at TLC

TLC was chosen as the study site because it is one of few transitional homes for women in Alabama that addresses some of the major challenges mothers face after prison such as unemployment, a limited education, homelessness, and substance abuse as they reintegrate into the community. Serving as a mechanism of support, TLC seemed to play an integral part in the reentry and family reunification efforts of these women (Kerley et al., 2001). Offering an array of services that helped them to navigate reentry, TLC was an oasis of hope in the desert of societal rejection.
Many of these women seemed to be seeking more informal facilitators of change not offered in an educational course or job training such as encouragement, social support, a sense of self-worth and acceptance. With its strong religious emphasis, TLC requires its residents to attend faith-based counseling sessions, devotional and church services, and bible study several times a week. This transitional center seems to function as a source for the positive attitudes that these women displayed. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that TLC’s emphasis on religion and spirituality greatly influenced the women’s perceptions of themselves. It was clear that spirituality served as one of the mechanisms participants used to cope with separation from their children and make sense of past choices that led to their involvement in criminal activity. The narratives derived from the interviews, suggest that these faith-based services were seen as extremely beneficial to the women in this study; perhaps, even the most important aspect of the center. Participants often credited “prayer” and an unrelenting “trust in God” for how they overcame and continue to overcome being separated from their children.

In addition to a religious aspect of transformation, some women attributed their change to other services offered by TLC like classroom-based parenting education, vocational training, assistance obtaining employment, GED classes, mentoring program, and substance abuse treatment. According to the participants the parenting education courses were very beneficial. Though participation in these parenting courses did not seem to be emphasized as much as some other aspects of the program such as employment, education, and sobriety, it was still a core part of the program curriculum. According to participants, the parenting courses at TLC emphasized the importance of a mother’s involvement in the lives of her children and provided them with information on
child development and disciplinary techniques. Some of these women had been away from their children for very long periods of time and these courses seemed vital to help these mothers establish positive contact with their children and greatly improved their chances for maintaining healthy relationships upon reentry.

The various parenting courses sought to strengthen the parent’s relationships with their children by teaching skills important for family functioning. There were even courses designed for parents who were not currently recognized as their children’s legal guardian. There were also some participants who indicated that because they had taken parenting courses in prison, they were not required to take any at The Lovelady Center. For others, the parenting courses may have been offered during times that were inconvenient for them and they would have to postpone taking them. One participant who had lost custody of one of her children explained why she was not taking the “Parents without Custody” course offered at TLC: “I am not taking a parenting class. I started a parenting class, but I got a new job and I had to quit that class due to my schedule so I transferred. We are all required to take classes, but I took different classes.”

In the hierarchy of principles emphasized at TLC, education seemed to come second to religion. This strategy seems very much warranted given the statistics on education and women in prison. The Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that approximately 44% of women in state prison have neither a high school diploma nor a GED (Harlow, 2003). Education level was not obtained from the participants of this study, but narratives are consistent previous research and support the notion that a majority of the participants lack a “formal” high school education. Many participants indicated either plans to obtain their GED or enroll in post-secondary education courses.
Policy Implications

Approximately half of all State and Federal inmates reported that they had used drugs in the month before their offense, and over three-quarters indicated that they had used drugs during their lifetime (Mumola, 1999). The fact is that many of our nation’s prisons are not equipped to offer effective substance abuse treatment programs. Moreover, the programs that do exist are disproportionately made available to male and not female inmates. With a large number of women inmates reentering society with untreated, substance abuse issues, it is imperative that correctional programs offer more treatment for incarcerated women. For inmates reentering society, an untreated drug addiction could serve as a catalyst to resuming old behavior patterns and can cause a great deal of strain on familial relationships (Naser & Visher, 2006). Visher and Courtney (2007) found that participation in substance abuse treatment decreased the likelihood of drug use after release.

Drug Laws

Statistical data show that women are the fastest growing prison population and a large number of them are convicted of nonviolent, drug-related offenses (Guerino, et. al, 2011). Fifty percent of the participants in this study reported drug offense convictions while only 14 percent reported violent offense convictions. The very policies that were put into force nearly three decades ago to combat drugs is now crippling America’s families. It is important that legislators revisit mandatory sentencing laws. Sentencing laws developed and reformed over the last two decades fail to consider family matters.
where parenting women offenders are concerned. Federal and State governments should embrace the task of re-evaluating policies and employing more alternatives to incarceration. Women offenders convicted of non-violent, drug-related offenses could benefit from residing in transitional facilities like TLC that offer substance abuse treatment and opportunities to obtain job skills and gain legitimate employment. Offering treatment solutions to parenting women that do not completely remove them for their children’s lives could help them fully recover from their addiction with the support and help of their family and preserve the family unit. Jackie Crawford, the Director of the Nevada Department of Corrections, argues that non-violent offenders convicted of property crimes and drug offenses are good candidates for alternatives to incarceration. She states, “It is a common understanding among criminologists and corrections professionals that offenders who commit property crimes do not usually need to be incarcerated, as they are not a violent threat to society.” For female in particular, she contends, “It is more appropriate to employ alternatives to incarceration for more female offenders, as they tend to be nonviolent and not a threat to society.”

*Prisons and Corrections*

Our nation’s prison system disregards the subject of family matters when it comes to regulatory practices. Corrections and prison administrators would be well advised to take a better look at existing policies and regulations that ignore the differences between male and female offenders. Incarceration can have irreparable effects on the family dynamic with the continued enforcement of current correctional regulations. Corrections officials must take responsibility for the implementation of more programs that promote
maintaining family ties during incarceration. For many of the women in this study, contact with their children during incarceration was nearly impossible. Some participants cited restrictive visitation services as a barrier to maintaining consistent contact with their children. The location of prison facilities was also shown to impact the frequency of visitation. Naser and Visher (2006) contend that the implications for their findings should urge policy makers to consider the geographical locations of prison facilities in relation to the offender’s home and families. They argued that “geographical distance determines both the frequency and regularity of prison visitation (Naser & Visher, 2006).”

Many of the participants of this study reported an inability to rely on frequent telephone communication to maintain connections with their children during incarceration due to the economic hardship it placed on their families. For some women whose geographical location makes it nearly impossible to receive frequent visits, telephone communication was the next best thing. Despite the astronomical rates of collect phone calls from prisons, families use this form of communication regularly (Naser & Visher, 2006). Being the primary means for families to communicate, corrections officials should consider offering these calls at a much lower per minute rate to ease the financial strain on prisoner’s families.

*Reentry Planning and the Community*

Reentry reform emphasizing more effective programs to meet the specific needs of parenting women is conducive to the reduction of recidivism and the reduction of incarceration’s adverse effects on offenders and their families. These programs should be designed to meet the needs of all returning inmates. An offender’s obligations to their
children and families must be considered in reentry planning. Naser and Visher (2006) contend that maintaining family connections greatly impacts an ex-offender’s achievement of social goals such as crime reduction and community development. With the collaborative efforts of state and federal agencies, non-profit organizations, and communities to ensure every resource is afforded to these transitioning offenders, they will have a much better chance of leading crime-free lives.

Study Limitations

The results of this study were obtained from a small sample of only 14 women. Because of the qualifications required for participants, residents’ work schedules, and events at TLC, it was difficult to get a larger sample for this study in a five week period. The limited time frame was based on time constraints with my own schedule. I worked 40 hours a week at my full-time job while also attending classes. I also juggled my responsibilities as a parent in order to conduct these interviews. The research facility was located several miles from my job and home so I was not able to interview more than two residents in one trip. The interviews were usually scheduled between 6 pm and 8pm two times per week. Without these time constraints, I would have been able to interview more residents and gather more information.

The use of a single study site was another limitation. This research was obtained at only one women-only transitional facility and findings may not be representative of all parenting women transitioning from prison to home or all ex-offenders residing at a transitional facility. It is also advisable not to generalize these results to all residents of religious-based transitional facilities. This study may also be further weakened by its
overrepresentation of White inmate mothers and underrepresentation of their black counterparts. Since participation in the study was voluntary and no reference group existed, it is impossible to determine the extent of the differences between mothers who met the criteria but either chose not to participate or could not due to scheduling conflicts and time restraints. Future research conducted in a similar manner across multiple states and transitional facilities without the time constraints of this study could further validate these results.

Conclusion

The rise in the female prison population affects an unprecedented number of families in our country and our own communities. Incarcerated mothers face a number of challenges both during and after imprisonment. In the face of these challenges, mothers must find ways to cope with and overcome these challenges in order to successfully reintegrate upon their release. Findings of this study suggest that, despite the circumstances that led to their incarceration and the obstacles they faced while in prison, the overall goal for these women is to be better mothers to their children. Being better mothers is the motivating factor behind their self-improvement efforts. They have a relatively optimistic outlook on maintaining their sobriety, furthering their education, gaining and maintaining jobs, and living crime-free lives all in an effort to rebuild their relationship with their children.

It is important for policy makers, corrections officials and community organizations to understand that ex-offenders are not the only people that benefit from their desistance from crime. The children and families of offenders will reap the rewards
as they are usually impacted the most. The community itself also stands to benefit as the revolving door of prisons is closed and public safety is less of a concern for these reentering offenders. For women offenders in particular, receiving the appropriate substance abuse treatment could help put an end this viscous recidivist cycle for female drug users. Corrections officials should address the lack of effective treatment programs within prison facilities so that these inmates are given a better chance at maintaining sobriety upon reentry. In addition, 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 and take into account the damaging effects of incarceration on families especially when it’s the primary caretaker who is incarcerated. More research on reentry planning and existing reentry programs could help policy-makers and corrections officials identify what components are fundamental to a specific program’s measured success and offer more evidence supporting reformation of drug laws and the institution of more alternative sentencing options. Reforming current reentry programs based on research results of reentry program evaluations could help to address the issue of rampant incarceration of women in our country as many of them are returning inmates. The weight of this responsibility should not lie solely on the shoulders of one entity, but should be a joint effort by all those involved in the criminal justice process from sentencing to community reentry.
References


Interview Guide

I. Children

a. Tell me about your children.
   i. Number of children?
   ii. How old are they?
   iii. Where are they now? /While you were incarcerated?
   iv. With whom do they currently reside?
   v. Who has legal custody?
   vi. Did they live with them prior to your incarceration?

b. What is your relationship like with your kids?

II. Path to Prison

a. What led to you becoming incarcerated?

b. What crime(s) were you convicted of?

c. Any history of substance abuse?
   i. Length of use?
   ii. Drug(s) of choice?

III. Obstacles Faced in Prison

a. Biggest concern as a parent?

b. Did you fear you’d lose your children’s love?

c. Did you fear they’d be taken away from you?
d. How often were you in contact with your children?
   
   i. Phone?

   ii. Visitation

   iii. Mail?

   e. What steps did you take to overcome these obstacles?

   f. How is your relationship with your children’s caretakers?

IV. The Lovelady Center (TLC)

   a. How did you end up at TLC?

   b. How long have you been at TLC?

   c. What programs/classes have you participated in?

   d. Which ones do you feel were the most beneficial?

   e. How has this program helped you to overcome difficulties reestablishing your role as parent?

V. Define Mother

   a. What do you think the role of a mother is?

   b. Did you feel you fulfilled that role before going to prison?

      i. In prison?

      ii. Now?

   c. What do you think makes a “good mother”?

   d. Do you consider yourself a good mother?

   e. Do you feel like you failed as a mother?

   f. What are the plans for the future?
Form 4: IRB Approval Form
Identification and Certification of Research
Projects Involving Human Subjects

UAB's Institutional Review Boards for Human Use (IRBs) have an approved Federalwide Assurance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP). The Assurance number is FWA00005960 and it expires on January 24, 2017. The UAB IRBs are also in compliance with 21 CFR Parts 50 and 56.

Principal Investigator: LEDYARD, LATOYA F
Co-Investigator(s): COPES, JOHN HEITH
MORGAN, KATHRYN D
Protocol Number: F120711001
Protocol Title: Parenting and Parole: The Effects of Incarceration on Motherhood

The IRB reviewed and approved the above named project on 8/1/2012. The review was conducted in accordance with UAB's Assurance of Compliance approved by the Department of Health and Human Services. This Project will be subject to Annual continuing review as provided in that Assurance.

This project received FULL COMMITTEE review.

IRB Approval Date: 8/1/2012

Date IRB Approval Issued: 08-23-12
Identification Number: IRB00000726
HIPAA Waiver Approved?: N/A
Partial HIPAA Waiver Approved?: N/A

Investigators please note:

The IRB approved consent form used in the study must contain the IRB approval date and expiration date.

IRB approval is given for one year unless otherwise noted. For projects subject to annual review research activities may not continue past the one year anniversary of the IRB approval date.

Any modifications in the study methodology, protocol and/or consent form must be submitted for review and approval to the IRB prior to implementation.

Adverse Events and/or unanticipated risks to subjects or others at UAB or other participating institutions must be reported promptly to the IRB.