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Understanding the Lives of Mothers after Incarceration: Moving Beyond Socially Constructed Definitions of Motherhood

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**Abstract**

In the wake of mass incarceration, an increasing number of women are going through the penal system. A fair number of these women are mothers, yet the intersection of motherhood and prison may contradict conceptions of femininity and challenge traditional views of appropriate mothering. The contradiction between notions of criminality and femininity contributes to stigmatized perceptions of formerly incarcerated mothers, which drastically shapes their ability to reintegrate into society post-incarceration. While reentry efforts tackle gender differences through the implementation of gender-responsive programs that cater to women’s needs, failure to adequately account for unique maternal experiences may hinder attempts to address obstacles faced by mothers in particular, such as regaining child custody and paying for day care. This article argues for special attention to the post-incarceration experiences of mothers without imposing socially constructed definitions of motherhood like having custody and living with children, which may not coincide with the realities mothers face after imprisonment. Ideas are also discussed for the inclusive consideration of formerly incarcerated mothers and their post-incarceration experiences.

**Introduction**

There were roughly 6.98 million adults under some form of correctional supervision by the close of 2011 (Glaze & Parks 2012). Though males disproportionately outnumber females at different stages in the criminal justice system (Guerino et al. 2011; Minton 2013), there is still considerable stigma towards female offenders given the perceived contradictions between criminality and femininity. Specifically, social stereotypes of criminality entail a criminal being threatening and forceful, which conflict with social meanings of femininity as delicate and
passive (Steffensmeier & Allan 1996). As a result, “crime is almost always stigmatizing for females, and its potential cost to life chances is much greater than for males” (Steffensmeier & Allan 1996, p. 476). Given that most incarcerated women will eventually return back to society, there are gender-responsive programs specifically geared towards supporting women in their reentry and helping them overcome gendered obstacles. Yet, post-incarceration obstacles may be further exacerbated for females who are also mothers.

Formerly incarcerated mothers can be ostracized as female offenders and, as a result of their parental role, further stigmatized as inadequate mothers (Dodge & Pogrebin 2001). Female offenders in state correctional facilities are more likely than their male counterparts to have minor children (Glaze & Maruschak 2008; Mumola 2000; Snell & Morton 1994), to have lived with their children pre-incarceration (Mumola 2000; Snell & Morton 1994), and to have cared for their children daily before their incarceration (Glaze & Maruschak 2008). A mother’s incarceration is often viewed by society as confirmation that her priorities were elsewhere in lieu of her maternal responsibilities. These assumptions and the accompanying stigmatization of incarcerated mothers may persist after imprisonment. For instance, upon their release, mothers are also more likely to have their parental rights terminated for reasons associated with their incarceration (Hagan & Coleman 2001). Thus, in order to adequately assist formerly incarcerated mothers, their maternal experiences must be understood through their own narratives of motherhood.

This article begins by discussing normative descriptions of mothers and social constructions of what motherhood entails, while noting social responses to mothers who deviate from these understandings. The article then draws upon existing literature to explore the unique circumstances faced by formerly incarcerated mothers despite (and as a result of) socially
imposed definitions of motherhood. Lastly, recommendations are made for future empirical research that is not restricted by a reliance on social constructions of motherhood; instead, the suggestions inclusively examine the lives of formerly incarcerated mothers to incorporate their unique experiences within reentry efforts.

**Mothers, mothering, and motherhood**

In addition to members of the public, formal agents of social and correctional systems also hold socially constructed understandings of what mothering is and what motherhood entails. They often assess motherhood according to conditions of “intensive mothering” in which appropriate childrearing is “child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive” (Hays 1996, p. 8). As a result, these formal agencies conceptualize mothers as women whom spend a considerable amount of time with their children as primary caretakers, devote substantial funds towards childrearing, and place the needs and desires of their children before any personal interests (see Hays 1996; Kruttschnitt 1984). Those who deviate from these norms of motherhood are perceived as having “spoiled identities” (Goffman 1963) and stigmatized with social labels of being “bad” mothers. Mothers of color may find themselves at the receiving end of this stigma due to “divergent social worlds” (see Peterson & Krivo 2010), which distinguish them from the ideals of white, middle class mothers (Roberts 1993). Furthermore, stigmatization is often directed towards teenage mothers (Horowitz 1995; Luttrell 2003), “welfare moms” (Hays 2003; Horowitz 1995; Seccombe 2007), non-resident mothers (Gustafson 2014; Kielty 2008), drug-addicted mothers (Litt & McNeil 1997; Murphy & Rosenbaum 1999) and mothers involved in the criminal justice system (Arditti 2012; Baunach 1985; Dodge & Pogrebin 2001; Golden 2005; Sharpe 2015). Such stigmatized groups
are not mutually exclusive given that mothers may also fall into a mixture of these often overlapping groups (Arditti 2012; Baunach 1985; Horowitz 1995; Sharpe 2015).

Formal agencies of social and correctional systems may impose these social constructions onto women and penalize those who do not conform, which has serious implications for decisions made in the courtroom (Flavin 2001; Kruttschnitt 1984) and in the foster care system (Hagan & Coleman 2001). For instance, mothers who do not live with their children are less likely to be released on their own recognizance pre-trial and, thus, receive less compassion compared to other mothers who do live with their children and conform to this norm (Flavin 2001; Kruttschnitt 1984). In addition, mothers who do not live with their children but live with other family members are punished more severely than mothers who live with both parties (Flavin 2001). It is evident that non-residential mothers have a greater likelihood of incarceration; this differential treatment may be shaped by assumptions that someone else is the primary caretaker or readily available in the mothers’ absence, presumably mediating the impact of their incarceration (see Flavin 2001). The foster care system may also impose social constructions of motherhood onto women in the criminal justice system. According to the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA), mothers can have their parental rights terminated if their child is in the foster care system for 15 months of the previous 22 months. This policy specially impacts incarcerated mothers as their time served under custody may exceed the allotted interval before parental termination. This conflict places them at risk of losing legal rights to their children despite potential efforts – albeit unrecognized or undervalued – at mothering within the confines of a correctional facility (see Covington 2003).

Social constructions of motherhood by formal agencies determine the actions that are valued and rewarded as appropriate mothering approaches, while simultaneously establishing
women as “bad” mothers if they do not follow this ideology (Hays 1996). Formerly incarcerated mothers, in particular, may continue to face impractical expectations and multiple sources of stigmatization upon their release. Bearing in mind existing gender norms and social constructions of motherhood, it is important to consider formerly incarcerated mothers as the unique group they represent.

**Maternal incarceration**

Mothers in the criminal justice system often have histories of trauma (Covington 2003; Richie 2001), mental instability (Covington 2003; Glaze & Maruschak 2008; Richie 2001), and drug or alcohol addiction (Glaze & Maruschak 2008) – a combination of factors that Arditti and Few (2008) refer to as a “triple threat” that impacts mother-child relationships. This “triple threat” weakens mothers’ involvement both psychologically and physically (Arditti & Few 2008). In fact, Siegel (2011) argues that the maternal involvement before incarceration shapes mother-child relationships during and after mothers’ imprisonment. Children with disengaged mothers pre-incarceration may experience long periods away from their mothers and form caregiving networks in the mothers’ absence; children with sporadically engaged mothers find themselves occasionally in the care of others while mothers battle a triple threat of life challenges (Siegel 2011). Although these children experience less of an impact from maternal incarceration due to their previous circumstances (Siegel 2011), the largest and collective effect children face is the emotional turmoil associated with their mothers’ incarceration (Siegel 2011). Extensive research also examines the effect of maternal incarceration on children’s residential instability (Geller et al. 2009; Hissel 2014), educational achievement (Cho 2009; Hagan & Foster 2012), and problem behaviors like aggression, rule breaking and dropping out of school (Hissel
In their research on children’s behavioral problems, Wildeman and Turney (2014) find that some children benefit from maternal incarceration. They also suggest that pre-incarceration disadvantages may contribute more to the negative effects on children than the maternal incarceration itself (Wildeman & Turney 2014).

Everything considered, society is more inclined to sympathize with children and devote more attention to children than their justice-involved mothers. The attention given to children is warranted but more consideration should be directed to the post-incarceration experiences of mothers given that they often view the navigation of motherhood as a vital incentive to desist from crime and reintegrate into society after their release (Brown & Bloom 2009; Covington 2003; Hayes 2009; Leverentz 2014; Michalsen 2011). The disproportionate attention given to the children may further distance society from the importance and complexity of maternal experiences, while simultaneously feeding discussions of “mother-blaming” (see Caplan 1998) and contributing to perceptions of justice-involved mothers as “unfit” or “bad” (Golden 2005; Sharpe 2015). Such social responses make formerly incarcerated mothers particularly susceptible to social and structural impediments, which can negatively impact their lives as they face costs for both abiding by and challenging social expectations of motherhood (Dodge & Pogrebin 2001; Hayes 2009). The following demonstrates how formerly incarcerated mothers may confront social expectations of mothering, societal ideals of motherhood, and structural reprimands that place further burdens on their reintegration.

**Employment and financial challenges**

Formerly incarcerated individuals often encounter obstacles to obtain and sustain employment, finding themselves with limited opportunities in the low-wage sector (Brown & Bloom 2009; Dodge & Pogrebin 2001; Hagan & Dinovitzer 1999). As a result, they are likely to
seek financial assistance from family members to cover daily expenses and outstanding debts, such as court fines (Brown & Bloom 2009). While some receive financial assistance from relatives, this puts a strain on the finances of family members who are less fortunate or also caring for the mothers’ children (Dodge & Pogrebin 2001). These employment and financial difficulties may further complicate the act of mothering post-incarceration. Specifically, unstable employment and income can trigger inconsistent routines, financial obstacles to provide for children, difficulties with affordable childcare arrangements, and associated stress that may influence parent-child relationships (Arditti & Few 2008; Brown & Bloom 2009; Edin & Lein 1997; Scott et al. 2004). As written by Brown and Bloom (2009, p. 332): “Reunion with children takes place in situations where the woman is dependent on others and is still not really in control of her own life.” Such financial obstacles can be particularly detrimental for formerly incarcerated mothers, aggravating attempts at reintegrating into society and navigating motherhood amidst desires and expectations to do so.

Living arrangements

Since mothers are likely to have lived with their children and served as primary caretakers pre-incarceration (Glaze & Maruschak 2008; Mumola 2000), they often expect and hope to live with their children upon their release (Baunach, 1985; Brown & Bloom 2009). Yet, mothers face difficulties in finding permanent housing post-incarceration and may encounter unstable housing including homelessness, which presents obstacles as they seek suitable housing for themselves and their children (Roman & Travis 2004). Since the children’s fathers are seldom involved or financially stable, mothers are often unable to rely on the fathers and, instead, rely on other family members for the care of their children (Dodge & Pogrebin 2001). They may exhibit gratefulness for family serving as temporary caregivers, but they may also feel
jealousy if unable to realistically provide for their children given common difficulties in finding stable, affordable housing post-incarceration (Arditti & Few 2008). Some mothers struggle with attempts to live with their children, yet others decide to leave their children in the care of family to maintain consistency with arrangements made in their physical absence (Michalsen 2011). Some formerly incarcerated mothers may also encounter hostility from their children because of these adjustments, forcing them to balance “their own process of reintegration and the transitions of their loved ones” (Brown & Bloom 2009, p. 325). Thus, changes in mother-child relationships and problems finding stable housing can negatively impact mothers’ plans to reside with their children and contribute to preexisting stress after incarceration.

Mothering techniques

Mothers may also struggle to manage motherhood within a correctional system that stresses idealistic notions of femininity and mothering, while penalizing mothers whom diverge from these social constructions (Ferraro & Moe 2003; Haney 2010). For instance, maternal desires to provide for children during financial difficulties are often associated with violations of parole conditions given that mothers are “filled with expectations of caring for others while under the gaze of the state” (Ferraro & Moe 2003, p. 23). In her ethnographic study, Haney (2010) found that some mothers under correctional supervision were deemed “bad mothers” and scolded for treating their children with tough love. However, the mothers deemed tough love as a necessary parenting approach to teach their children survival techniques for the realities faced in their neighborhoods (Haney 2010). Moreover, mothers of color – fraught with racial inequalities in society – often engage in “motherwork” in which they empower children (both biological and non-biological) against the social and structural barriers they collectively confront as racial minorities (Collins 1994; see also O’Reilly 2014). Their tough love parenting serves to protect
their children from the dangers in their community and the attention of the police, while the parenting of White middle-class mothers typically places emphasis on the proper education and employment for future success (Brown & Bloom 2009). Formerly incarcerated mothers may also employ discipline and tough love to prevent their children from following in their footsteps and making the same mistakes they made (Hayes 2009). Though mothers justify this parenting approach according to their life circumstances, this approach may not coincide with social constructions of what mothering entails, therefore, exposing them to further stigmatization (Haney 2010). These factors can be particularly problematic for mothers attempting to regain custody of their under-aged children.

**Custodial arrangements**

Combined with stressors from living arrangements, finances, and familial support (Bresler & Lewis 1983; Enos 2001; Stenius et al. 2005), mothers may also encounter issues with formal agents concerning the custodial arrangements of their children. Mothers seeking custody are forced to negotiate with formal agencies and comply with imposed notions of mothering that may conflict with day-to-day realities (Dodge & Pogrebin 2001; Haney 2010). For mothers who regain custody of their children, some demonstrate contentment with the adjustments while others experience significant difficulties in financially supporting their children post-incarceration (Arditti & Few 2008). Some mothers encounter more difficulties and may lose custody battles, reinforcing the emotional pain of separation they endured during their incarceration (Hayes 2009). Other mothers decide not to seek custody of their children due to battles with formal agencies, familial disagreements, or the belief that it was in the best interest of the children to stay with family members who raised them in the mothers’ absence (Enos 2001; Hayes 2009; Michalsen 2011). Yet, even in the face of distant caregiving and custodial
arrangements, formerly incarcerated women continue to maintain their maternal identity through other factors such as biological markers (Enos 2001) or the values placed on protective mothering behaviors from a distance (Brown & Bloom 2009). According to Hayes (2009), positive support from family is a major contributor to mothers’ ability to manage life post-incarceration, gain custody of children, and subsequently enact their “ideal of mothering.”

Despite the variety of challenges mothers encounter post-incarceration, motherhood serves as a critical motivator in women’s reentry efforts and should be coupled with the social support to navigate motherhood through post-incarceration obstacles. For instance, Beth Richie (2001, p. 379) declares that with “adequate support for being a parent, having even a non-custodial relationship with one’s children can be an important stabilizing force in women’s lives as they make difficult transitions.” Despite the importance of a positive support network, formerly incarcerated mothers are often void of this support from society while stigmatized and chastised according to social meanings of motherhood. Consequently, society and formal agencies should avoid imposing socially constructed definitions of motherhood upon formerly incarcerated mothers; instead, their maternal experiences must be understood through their own understandings of motherhood.

**Suggestions for future research**

In spite of normative descriptions of motherhood, formerly incarcerated mothers may navigate motherhood as they see fit to their circumstances; however, because of these social meanings, they are stigmatized and exposed to additional barriers to their reintegration into society. This sparks at least three areas worthy of further investigation.

*Mothers’ narratives of post-Incarceration motherhood*
Difficulties in mothers’ lives and relationships may complicate their navigation of motherhood post-incarceration and, at times, contribute to additional stress (Hayes 2009; Michalsen 2011). Yet, their navigation of motherhood may also serve as a major source of encouragement in their reintegration (Brown & Bloom 2009; Covington 2003; Hayes 2009). Future criminological research should qualitatively analyze the effects of incarceration on formerly incarcerated mothers, in particular, using narratives of their own experiences. For instance, how do formerly incarcerated mothers understand their own maternal behaviors through post-incarceration obstacles? Since there is a plethora of research on their children, it may also be interesting to compare children’s interpretations of their mothers’ behaviors to the mothers’ narratives of their maternal desires and actions.

Distinct consideration of racial-ethnic minority groups

Experiences of justice-involved mothers are examined across a Black/White racial dichotomy; however, in order to understand the realities of post-incarceration motherhood, future research should examine differences that transcend this racial dichotomy and explores across ethnic lines. African-American mothers confront various social inequalities by way of inadequate and insufficient resources that may further harm their reintegration upon their release. The “systemic punishment” of African-American mothers can be found within the correctional system and other overlapping systems, such as the foster care system; Roberts (2012, p. 1491) argues that the prison system and foster care system overlap, “keeping them under the intense state supervision and blaming them for the hardships their families face as a result of societal inequities.” Hispanic and West Indian mothers may also experience social exclusion, albeit, with diverse circumstances such as transnational support networks and “transnational mothering” where they reside and mother in a different country than their country of origin (Colen 1995;
Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila 1997). Scholars note that the supportive family and community background of immigrant groups may potentially serve as a buffer to the effects of incarceration by way of familial expectations and support (see Foster & Hagan 2009). In addition to cultural differences, societal responses to different ethnic groups may also shape mothers’ experiences post-incarceration. For instance, society often considers West Indians as the “model minority” and White employers express preferences to hire this ethnic group in lieu of hiring African-Americans, who society labels as having weak work ethics (Waters, 1999). Such nuances are not uncovered when West Indians and African-Americans are grouped together as “Black,” which is often done in existing research.

A comparative exploration of African-American, Hispanic, and West Indian mothers will provide better insight to post-incarceration motherhood beyond a Black/white understanding that homogenizes women of color. Specifically, how may ethnic identities shape the maternal experiences of mothers reentering society after imprisonment? What similarities and differences exist between African-American, Hispanic, and West Indian mothers as they navigate motherhood in post-incarceration financial decisions? Living arrangements? Custodial arrangements? What role does family and the children’s fathers play in the reintegration process of each of these three groups? Does this differ when family members live predominantly outside of the United States? Are West Indian mothers comparable with Hispanic mothers in the familial assistance they receive during their incarceration and upon their release?

*Regard for non-residential and non-custodial formerly incarcerated mothers*

While existing research demonstrates strength in providing insights to post-incarceration mothering experience, study participants may be restricted to mothers who live with their children and have custody of dependent children (for example, see Hayes 2009). This social
construction of mothers as residing and having physical custody of their children may not coincide with the narratives of formerly incarcerated mothers. In fact, women can still mother without living with their children or having custody, which are common circumstances for mothers after imprisonment. Hence, the use of living arrangements and custodial agreements as determinations of motherhood may not appropriately represent mother-child relationships or the nature of mothers’ involvement (Gustafson 2014). Future research on the effects of parental incarceration should acknowledge the complexities of maternal relationships and, therefore, comparatively examine the experiences of formerly incarcerated mothers who – opposing social constructions of motherhood – may not live with or have contact with their children. For instance, how do mothers with varying degrees of parental involvement navigate motherhood post-incarceration? What are the similarities and differences between mothers with no contact, mothers with some contact but nonresidential, and mothers living with their children? How do mothers with no contact to their children manage the process of reintegrating back into society? How can agencies better support formerly incarcerated mothers with little to no contact or involvement with their children?

**Conclusion**

This article recommends future research that transcends societal perceptions and social constructions of motherhood. Research on maternal incarceration merits an exploration into mothers’ narratives with attention to the intricacies of racial-ethnic differences, and complexities of parental contact and involvement. Doing so permits an inclusive understanding of the experiences of formerly incarcerated mothers from their own narratives of motherhood. As proclaimed by Patricia Hill Collins (1994, p. 48): “We must distinguish between what has been
said about subordinated groups in the dominant discourse, and what such groups might say about themselves if given the opportunity.” These considerations may undermine discussions of “unfit” or “bad” mothers and provide a better understanding of post-incarceration motherhood; consequently, having larger implications for efforts to adequately help mothers reintegrate to society after their release.

Short Biography
Janet Garcia is a Ph.D. Candidate at Rutgers University School of Criminal Justice. Her research primarily evaluates prevalent disparities that hinder social equality – that is, the issues of racial-ethnic differences in particular policing strategies, the impact of incarceration on communities of color, and the obstacles faced during prisoner reentry. She has recently published in the *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* (2015). Janet has also received numerous fellowships including the Rutgers University Presidential Fellowship, the Rutgers University Dissertation Fellowship, and the American Society of Criminology Graduate Fellowship for Ethnic Minorities.

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