

# Incarcerated mothers: Relationships and recommendations

**Barbaranne Benjamin**, University of Toledo, United States of America,  
barbaranne.benjamin@utoledo.edu

**Jane A. Cox**, Kent State University, United States of America

**Paula Dupuy**, University of Toledo, United States of America, paula.dupuy@utoledo.edu

**Eric Lambert**, Wayne State University, United States of America, ELamber55555@gmail.com

**John M. Laux**, University of Toledo, United States of America, john.laux@utoledo.edu

**Lois A. Ventura**, University of Toledo, United States of America

**Celia Williamson**, University of Toledo, United States of America, celia.williamson@utoledo.edu

## Abstract

*This 24-month project studied the experiences and perceptions of female offenders to provide an understanding of their needs within the criminal justice system and their relationships with their children. The importance of interpersonal communication and recommendations for incorporating interpersonal communication within the criminal justice system are suggested.*

*The research staff interviewed a total of 304 women who were mothers and were under criminal justice control in a mid-western state in the United States. Over the course of a year, a total of 1161 interviews were conducted. The women included the entire spectrum of offenders, including those who were released, on probation or parole, or incarcerated. To determine if the qualitative analysis of the interviews was reflective of the general experiences of this population, questionnaires were completed by 1,264 mothers under criminal justice control. The analysis of data from the questionnaires quantified and verified issues identified through the interviews.*

*The findings of this study indicate that institutional and community corrections personnel, policies, and practices can have a positive or negative effect on women and their children. To have a positive effect, policies and practices must recognise the unique gender-related problems and needs of women, including the importance of relationships to the women. This perspective is critical since the action of the criminal justice system toward mothers has a compounding effect, affecting the lives of both the women and their children. Findings suggest services provided to women should be consistent, long-term, responsive, seamless, and, to the greatest extent possible, relationship-based.*

A civilized society is concerned with the welfare of all its citizens, especially those who need additional support to function in that society. The population of female offenders, especially those who are mothers, requires special consideration due to the importance of these individuals in the lives of their children. Female offenders must find the support they need to function as productive adults and mothers so that the cycle of criminality across generations can be broken.

Rather than relying on expert opinion or professional judgment, the women themselves must assist in identifying the needs and types of services required to foster pro-social attitudes for the women to become responsible, functioning members of society. Professionals then can use the women's perceptions and experiences to modify existing programs to be more effective and to determine policies that are likely to succeed.

## **Significance of the problem**

The incarceration rate of women across the globe has been steadily increasing for the past two decades. In fact, the female prisoner population in the United States has more than doubled from 1990 to 2001 (Bloom, Owen, & Covington, 2003; Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000) with 1 in 265 women incarcerated (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2008). In the USA, women account for about 15% of the correctional population (Pew Charitable Trusts) while only 7.3% of the correctional population in New South Wales is female (Mental Health Coordinating Council, 2010). Crimes committed by women commonly consist of non-violent offences involving drugs, petty theft, welfare fraud, larceny, forgery, and prostitution. These offences are what researchers call "poverty-related crimes" (Lees, 2001; Women in Prison, 2005). For instance, a study of metropolitan facilities in Sydney, Australia found that 30% of women were from the three poorest suburbs (Indig et.al, 2009). A recent study in Oklahoma, USA, reported on drug involvement and found that close to one-half of women were incarcerated for a drug offence and nearly another 10% committed a drug offence along with other charges (Oklahoma Commission on Children and Youth, 2010). That is similar to the 58% of 470 women incarcerated in Austrian facilities who reported they were under the influence of drugs when arrested for their offence (Johnson, 2004).

Approximately 75% of women who commit crimes have an average of two minor children with 64% of female offenders living with their children prior to incarceration (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000). Clearly, when a mother offends, her behavior affects persons other than herself. According to researchers, the problems of mothers have a negative impact on their children (Johnson-Peterkin, 2003; Oklahoma Commission on Children and Youth, 2010). High quality relationships and stable, safe environmental conditions that can insulate a child from some of the negative consequences of a mother's incarceration are often absent. Unfortunately, a mother's incarceration often follows a time of family instability, conflict, and the absence of the children's father, which compound the effects of a mother's involvement in crime and her subsequent incarceration (Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002a, 2002b; Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2001).

The long-term effects of a mother's incarceration on her children vary and depend, to some extent, on the developmental level of the child. The mother's incarceration may interrupt bonding thus increasing the probability of abuse or neglect (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2001). The effects of incarceration likely result in insecure attachments that have been linked to emotional and psychological problems in young children; these problems include internal issues (anxiety, withdrawal, hyper vigilance, depression, shame, guilt) and external issues (anger, aggression, and hostility) toward others (Jose-Kampfner, 1995). School-aged children also experience school-related problems such as poor academic performance and poor peer relationships as a result of a mother's incarceration (Jose-Kampfner, 1991). These women and their children are at risk for a myriad of problems, such as poverty, increased chance of recidivism, greater probability of delinquency, heightened likelihood of victimisation and violence, and overall dysfunctional lives.

The nature and quality of care-giving arrangements and the ability to maintain contact with a mother while she is incarcerated are determinants of how well a child will cope with a mother's incarceration (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2001). Unfortunately, "because there are fewer women in prison, there are fewer women's prisons. Consequently women are more likely to be farther away from their homes" (Women in Prison, 2005, p.1). This presents practical barriers to children's ability to visit and stay connected to their mothers.

Post incarceration may also exacerbate an already difficult situation. Upon release from jail, obstacles such as lack of education, lack of employment, strained support systems, a history of substance abuse and/or mental illness, poor physical health, and lack of housing often exacerbate an ex-offender's difficulties. These deficits play a key role in marginalising individuals reentering society by limiting employment options, disrupting relationships, and making illegal activities economically attractive. These barriers have a negative effect on the family (Buck, 2000; U.S Department of Labor, 2001).

With research suggesting that family dysfunction is intergenerational, many of the children of female offenders will become delinquents and criminals (Simons, Simons, Wallace, & Akers, 2005). Research suggests that the best method to reduce the extent of this potential for future crime is to stabilise the family environment. Thus far, investigators of this problem have not determined the best ways to stabilise the family when dealing with children whose mothers are offenders. Agencies do not have evidence upon which to base decisions regarding appropriate responses to female offenders and their children when the mothers leave the criminal justice system or social service system; as a result, policymakers are unable to respond to this population in meaningful and effective ways.

The current approach has costly implications. First, female offenders suffer because their needs are not being addressed. Second, children of female offenders suffer because their mothers are less available to them. Finally, society pays a substantial price due to an increased burden on the government to provide services that may or may not be effective in reducing recidivism and to absorb the financial value of lost contributions by productive citizens.

The current literature is primarily composed of snapshots, single-time investigations of incarcerated women and the problems they face. There is a need for a longitudinal study of various problems that incarcerated women face as they progress through the criminal justice system and their re-integration into society. The descriptive study described below highlights the relationship and interpersonal concerns of incarcerated women as identified through a year-long qualitative study.

## Project design

The researchers followed 304 women who were arrested in Lucas County, Ohio, and agreed to participate in the study for one year to determine the impact of the criminal justice system on them and their relationship with their children. The women included the entire spectrum of offenders, including those who were on probation, incarcerated, or released. The women were paid \$5.00 for each interview unless they were incarcerated. The research team conducted a total of 1161 interviews, including 305 initial interviews (one woman participated in an interview under an alias as well as her legal name). Because of the transient nature of the population, the researchers could not reach many women for all of the interviews. Table 1 below represents those interviews conducted during the study year.

**Table 1:** Number of interviews

Interview Number	Number of Interviews
1	304
2	146
3	125
4	87
5	91
6	68
7	70
8	47
9	49
10	60
11	58
12	56
Total	1161

The authors trained graduate assistants from counselor education, criminal justice, and social work graduate programmes to conduct the interviews; these assistants attempted to remain in contact with the women on a bi-weekly basis. The expected problems of disconnected phone numbers, non-response to voice mail messages, and missed appointments to occur. Some women were committed to the project and maintained contact; others resumed participation when they were rearrested.

Since consistency of information across a number of domains was necessary, the interviews were semi-structured and included a number of open-ended questions that required short answers. The interviews were designed to gain information on the women's perceptions and opinions about their needs, issues, barriers, and experiences, as well as those of their children. Each interview consisted of general questions, the majority of questions on a specific topic, and a few questions from previous topics. These interviews took place at the jail, prison, public libraries, and other agreed-upon public meeting places (e.g., fast food restaurants) and lasted from one to two hours with participants' responses recorded on semi-structured interview forms.

To ensure that the research findings accurately reflected women's perceptions, opinions, and experiences, the researchers analysed each interview line-by-line (response by response) coding for patterns and common threads (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Two members of the research team met to jointly code one-half of the first interviews and agreed on procedures for coding. They met bi-weekly to discuss and review codes and procedures with a third member responsible for reviewing codes and themes and for helping the team to work through barriers. The next step involved collapsing related codes into themes. The team then grouped related themes into categories (usually corresponding to the major questions asked in the interviews). Finally, the research team grouped related categories into meta-themes.

To increase credibility and trustworthiness (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), interviewers were involved in prolonged engagement with participants, building trusting relationships with respondents and increasing the likelihood of honest participant responses. Further, the researchers triangulated the data by asking similar, connected, or complementary questions across interviews. Validity or "truth value" (Guba & Lincoln, 1998) was enhanced by providing the entire research team access to codes and themes and by meeting bi-weekly to comment on and discuss codes and themes. The team made a conscious effort to engage in "bracketing," the setting aside of individual's usual assumptions, prejudices, theories, and philosophies about a phenomenon (Boeree, 1998). Thus, the interviews and analyses provided an in-depth understanding of the issues facing these women to the greatest extent possible.

## Limitations

This investigation was limited in geographic scope to Ohio, a Midwestern state in the United States. Further, the sample was limited to women who were mothers who were involved in the criminal justice system in a metropolitan city in northwest Ohio and agreed to participate in the study. This descriptive study only involved mothers and did not study comparable groups of mothers who were in the general community, of women in the criminal justice system who were not mothers, or of incarcerated men. Other limitations included the usual limitations associated with qualitative research and the added difficulty of maintaining contact with the subjects over the period of a year.

## Qualitative analysis

The average age of the interviewees was 35 years with a range of 18 to 82 years. Forty-two percent (42%) were White, 45% were African American, 8% identified as Hispanic, and 5% identified as Other. Ethno-racial self-identifications within the Other category included Mixed, Native American, and Asian. Seventy-eight percent (78%) of the sample reported that they had an arrest record with an average of four arrests.

Nearly half of the women had experienced violence at home when growing up; one-third were victims of sexual assault as a child. Three-fourths experienced domestic violence as adults with one-fourth requiring hospitalisation. Most reported a close family member with a criminal history.

All of the women in the study had children with an average of two children residing with the mother; 19% of this sample reported they were grandparents. Seventy-three percent (73%) were not employed at the time of the interview; only 12% were employed full time. Poverty was a significant problem with \$448 per month the average take-home pay for those working mothers; for comparison, the poverty level for a family of three is \$18,300 per year. Forty-eight percent (48%) received some type of government assistance. The most commonly reported highest educational achievement was between 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade with an average of 11.6 years of education. Thirty-eight percent (38%) of participants had either a high school diploma or GED.

The investigators analysed the interview data to discern common patterns in the women's responses; these are reflected in the meta-themes presented in Table 2. Note that all findings reported in this study mirror the women's responses, including the recommendations they made for changes in the criminal justice system, need for continuing their relationships with their children, and factors that made a positive or negative impact on their lives.

**Table 2:** Meta-themes discovered in the qualitative interviews

criminal justice experiences
issues and views involving children and family
trauma and violence
rape and sexual abuse
women's experiences in childhood and adolescence
formal support systems
informal support systems
behavioral health risks
stigmatisation/discrimination
participation in the underground economy
commercial sexual exploitation and prostitution
pre-incarceration factors
factors during incarceration
post-incarceration factors
women's self-esteem, future dreams, and spiritual connections
the women's experiences with this project

## **Selected results**

The remainder of this paper will focus on the communication aspects incorporated within the meta-themes. These communication aspects include the central importance of interpersonal relationships when women are incarcerated and the role of communication in both formal and informal systems in supporting these women.

## **Importance of relationships**

The importance of relationships to women under criminal justice system control was made obvious to the researchers within the first few weeks of the start of the investigation. Many of the women were grateful for the contact with the graduate student interviewers and for having the opportunity to present their stories. For instance, one woman gave a student interviewer a contact number that was not the same as that provided to the correctional institution. When asked about the discrepancy, the woman replied she gave the real number where she could be reached to the graduate student. Several women who were released and lost contact called the researchers to return to the study to share their stories with the interviewers they knew.

The women were appreciative of the attention paid to them, the respect given to their stories, and the relationship established with the interviewer. Care was taken that the student interviewers were professional, safe, and insulated from becoming enmeshed in the women's lives. When asked to critique their experiences of the investigation during the final interview, several women volunteered their appreciation for the nonjudgmental relationship provided by the student interviewers.

## **Personal and social relationships**

Most of the women reported having support systems of friends and/or family members. This support came in the form of practical assistance such as money, housing or food and spiritual/emotional support. The women generally identified a female family member such as mother, grandmother, aunt, or sister who could care for their children prior to and during incarceration. One respondent shared, "My mom is stable and experienced with life. . . . My son gives me strength to live everyday and shows me that even if I am at my lowest point in life, I can just get up and go on with life." Another identified her cousin ". . . because she [the cousin] wants me to do the right thing. Cause she don't do drugs and wants me to be a better mother to my kids."

Almost all the women felt they had positive influences in their lives providing moral strength, strong minded positive outlooks, and role models of how to behave. These positive influences provided a support system for basic needs, keeping on track, and inspiring them to keep God in their lives. These positive influences included mothers, other family members, friends, church members, and even correctional officers and programme service providers. Respondents reported positive persons in their lives: "My sister, she speaks to me all the time about how God wants me to turn my life around and the positive things she sees in me"; "My mom, my sister, and my pastor. Sometimes we just pray over the phone. Some nights I'm on the phone with my mom and we say our prayers together"; "My friend, [she] encourages me to stay clean and sober and think things through before I react."

These women were appreciative of the consistency and support of these relationships no matter what happened, but some women also worried if their illegal behavior/absence/incarceration would be detrimental to these stabilising relationships. Some of the women perceived that specific family members were "upset", "disappointed", "shocked", and/or "embarrassed" by their incarceration.

Over half of the women also reported negative influences in their lives prior to incarceration in the form of dysfunctional relationships. Two-thirds of the fathers had been through the criminal justice system and one-third of the mothers considered the father a bad influence on their children. One mother reported, "His dad was abusive to me and they were connected, close. And now he's in jail and my son hurts to see him." Domestic violence was typical with two-thirds of the women reporting physical abuse; verbal abuse and fighting were common. "My kids' dad beat me up and knocked my tooth out. He beat me up in front of the kids." "My kids' father beat me and drug me down the steps. He choked me when I was pregnant, too." Often boyfriends or husbands were involved in negative or illegal activity and engaged the women in these activities. As one woman reported about her reason for incarceration, "He and his mother would encouraged me to go in and steal everyone's clothes, groceries etc. And they would pick me up." Another woman just "wanted to impress him". Yet another "prostituted for drugs and a sleeping room" for her boyfriend and herself. Finally, another woman reported she "took the blame for receiving stolen property".

### **Relationships with children**

Prior to incarceration, the women reported mostly good relationships with their children; two-third had custody of their children before incarceration. They described their parenting style as caring and supportive with several describing a structured, authoritative style. They handled issues/problems with their children by "talking out the problem" or using time-outs, taking away privileges, or grounding the child. In general, the father was not a part of the children's lives but the extended family provided support for both mother and children.

At the time of their arrest and incarceration, women reported that either their children were too young to understand or they used that experience as a lesson learned. One woman stated, "Because of me, they've learned not to go down the same road as me." Another said, "I became their example. Scared them to death. . . . I always told them that there are consequences for breaking the law."

All of the mothers were concerned for their children during their incarceration. The women worried that their children did not have their mother for daily interaction and/or special occasions; that their children would miss their mother's presence. One mother said, "As a mother, I think they need me for advice and help. My main concern is that I'm not there for them." The women worried their children might be anxious, worried, or confused by the absence of their mother; they worried their children might be embarrassed, angry, or resentful that their mother was incarcerated. One mother shared, "My son thinks they took me away from them." Another mother said, "He thinks, because I was locked up, that they did it. Because of his age, he doesn't understand it was my fault." Some believed their absence represented neglect. As one mother responded, "When I wasn't there and incarcerated, it's kind of neglect—because I wasn't there." Others have specific worries: "My grandma is caring for them, but she isn't a good caregiver so they are on their own." The statement "They need to be with me in a stable home" expressed a common sentiment of the women.

In terms of maintaining communication and a relationship with their children, almost half of the women in the study wrote letters at least once a week to their children; over half talked with their children by phone once a week even if, as reported by one mother, “they was kinda sad and would cry before we hung up the phone”. Some relayed messages to their children through other family members who visited. But less than one-quarter of the women received visits from their children at all. This lack of physical visitation was due to a number of factors including difficulty with transportation, scheduling constraints, or reluctance or embarrassment by the mother, child, or family.

The majority of women cited the lack of visits by children during incarceration as a major obstacle to maintaining a relationship with their children. These women saw visitations as important for their emotional connectivity with their children. Many women said, “I want more visitation with my children.” One woman’s response—that she “used to spend a lot of time with her—talking and playing with her”—was typical. These women wanted to be good mothers; maintaining a close relationship with their children was important to them. This separation was extremely difficult for them.

The women were more ambivalent regarding the benefit of visitation for their children. Some thought their children benefited by seeing the consequences of crime and witnessing that their mother was getting help. One mother confided, “I just worried about . . . how it would affect them.” Others found the concept of visitation uncomfortable with their children being searched, the difficulty of leaving at the end of visit, and the atmosphere of the inhospitable visiting facility.

### **Professional relationships**

The women were familiar with the police, the criminal justice detention system, and often social service systems including mental health and substance abuse counselling. The communication style of service professionals was paramount in the women’s perceptions of the systems and the ultimate effectiveness of the services.

When discussing the service providers and/or the police, the women reported positive experiences when professionals took the time to relate to them, respected the women and their concerns, and were advocates for the women. One respondent felt inspired by one of her counselors: “My counselor at the jail told me not to be a quitter and stop being a victim.” Another appreciated the staff: “I got to vent and they gave me useful resources and information to back into faith and let me know I’m not the only one.” Another found a new perspective: “By being here I took the focus off the drugs and [put the] focus on myself.”

The professionals were not helpful when they didn’t listen to the women’s concerns, acted as if they were just doing their job, or didn’t care about the women or the situation. Half of the women stated that they felt like objects being moved from one person in the social services system to the next person. One of the women who understood the system shared, “I filled out paperwork. The lies I told are probably a crime and I shouldn’t have to do that. I have a distinct advantage over the average person ‘cause when I filled out the paperwork, I knew more than most how to lie to get what I needed.”

These women deemed a stable relationship with established trust and communication with a professional as essential, especially in the mental health area. The women developed trust with certain professionals and preferred to maintain that relationship for future services rather than interacting with different persons who provided services but did not have the history with the women for a trusting relationship.

## Implications

Since most people under criminal justice control are men, it is not surprising that less attention is given to the needs of women, particularly mothers; however, it is critical that all components of the criminal justice and related systems recognise and respond to the needs of mothers. The attitude and actions of the criminal justice and social services systems toward mothers has a compound effect. It strongly affects the lives of the women and their children.

Simply superimposing on women the procedures and programmes designed for male offenders is not the best practice in dealing with women under criminal justice control; indeed, it is the worst possible practice. As summarised by the Mental Health Coordinating Council, “a decade after a number of important and influential research papers in Australia and internationally, we still are only tinkering at the edges of providing appropriate gender based services for women in gaol” (2010, p. 5). All professional personnel working with female offenders must reevaluate their procedures, practices, and programmes in light of the findings of this study.

When women are incarcerated, it is important that they are able to maintain contact with their children. The current study supports the Tuerk and Loper’s (2006) findings of increased stress when the women have limited contact with their children. Also, children who disconnect from their mothers are often at greater risk for depression, stress, acting out, and poorer school performance (Jose-Kampfner, 1991; 1995). Therefore, creating opportunities for women to interact frequently with their children in a positive way is important. Visiting programmes in jail and other corrections institutions should, to the greatest extent possible, allow direct contact between a mother and her children in a controlled but positive environment such as a library or programme room setting. To supplement personal visits, incarcerated mothers should have access to periodically scheduled phone calls to their children; Skype or other internet connections can be arranged in specific secure locations to provide additional communication interaction and relationship building between mothers and their children.

In general, mothers in this study believed they should be the person capable of providing for their children; they wanted to assume this important role but needed help and support to do so. The women did not want social services to usurp their responsibilities as mothers but instead wanted help to manage the challenges of motherhood and wanted support to be successful with their children. Based on this willingness, social service programmes should work to empower mothers to assume responsibility for their lives and for the lives of their children with the supportive help of agencies.

As an example of a responsibility-based programming, the recent development of the Good Lives Model which started in June, 2010, for women in the New South Wales Drug Court (Mental Health Coordinating Council, 2010), is based on the strengths of women rather than focusing on their limitations (Porporino & Fabiano, 2005). “The program provides opportunities for women to express themselves as ‘experts’ in their own lives” (Mental Health Coordinating Council, 2010, p. 8).

This willingness to “put the person in charge” is an expansion of the trust and respect that professionals must afford their client while providing only the support needed for her to succeed in her goals. Our recommendation is to move social service programs from a mode of providing “expert advice” and from that of “partnership and collaboration” to the next step of putting the client in control of identifying goals while the professional service provider is in the supportive role.

To provide the most benefit, support should consist of a long-term relationship with a trusted, skilful, and consistent professional. The women in this study believed that service providers could best help them if services were made accessible and use-friendly, and if the same caring professional maintained contact rather than the women being handed off to another (unknown) professional as services or systems changed. Continuity of care is needed; this requires community services to follow women into local corrections institutions and back into the community after their release. The continuity of care across systems with the same trusted professional is paramount for the effectiveness of care:

Unless a major focus on providing continuity of care from correctional agencies in collaboration with a broad range of community services providing post release programs, care, treatment and support services and access to primary health care is established, it is unlikely that the system can bring about change to the lives of women in the criminal justice system. (Mental Health Coordinating Council, 2010, p. 8)

Criminal justice and community services should be encouraged to develop collaborative systems to provide this continuum of care through structured opportunities for incarcerated women to spend time playing and interacting with their young children, with information and assistance these women need to access the services required by their children, and with parenting support groups both in the community and in local corrections institutions. These programmes and services must create an atmosphere of respect, assist the women to address the core issues that contributed to their poor judgment and criminal behavior, empower the women to take responsibility for their children and their decisions, and provide a cognitive-behavioral approach with additional emphasis on the relationship component that is more gender-specific to women’s needs.

## Conclusion

Most women in the criminal justice system are both offenders and victims; they have, for the most part, committed non-violent crimes but often are the victims of domestic violence and/or sexual assault. The overwhelming majority of the women in jail and on probation are poor, lacking advanced education and training, and having limited employability. Women under criminal justice control commonly suffer from substance abuse problems as well as physical and mental illnesses. None-the-less, these women are mothers who care about their children and hope and strive for a better future for their children.

To address the myriad problems faced by mothers under criminal justice control, professionals in criminal justice and community service must reduce compartmentalisation within and between their systems to work collaboratively. Communication is the key. Further, the professionals must trust in the judgment of the individual mother to decide on what is most useful to her to help her attain what she identifies as needs. Universities also need to educate criminal justice, social work, and counseling professionals in ways that promote collaboration and communication rather than compartmentalisation among the professions; they must promote an approach of respect for the client rather than any emphasis on duty or provision of services.

A continuum of client-identified services is essential to interrupt the destructive cycle of problems women offenders and their children face. Governments must give high priority to funding services that support a continuum of safety, care, and treatment for mothers under criminal justice control, and that continuum must continue after that control has ended. The alternative is a growing phenomenon of multi-generational incarceration and recidivism on the part of an ever-increasing racial, social, and economic.

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