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Reentry and Renegotiating Motherhood

Maternal Identity and Success on Parole

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Parenting women emerging from prison on parole face numerous challenges to their successful reentry into the community. Along with finding housing, employment, and satisfying the conditions of their supervision, parenting women must also reassume their roles as mothers. This article adds to the literature on reentry by placing women's maternal concerns at the forefront of this process. Combining quantitative explorations of women's parole case files (203) with in-depth interviews (25), this research demonstrates that reentering mothers confront many of the same problems that mediated their incarceration: poverty, lack of education, unstable housing, lack of access to social services, underemployment, and addiction. While the maternal role may constitute a conventional identity "script" for these ex-inmates and motivate their success on parole, the challenges they face that impact their childrearing before prison make reassuming their maternal roles a precarious enterprise. Recommendations for gender-responsive policies and programs are provided.

Keywords: *gender; reentry; motherhood; parole; policy*

Introduction

The past several decades have witnessed dramatic increases in the number of women under criminal justice supervision. At midyear 2007, there were more than 115,000 women incarcerated in U.S. state and federal prisons (Sabol & Couture, 2008). And as with men, the vast majority of these women will be returning to their families and communities after prison. In 2006, women represented 12% of the overall parole population

in the United States or about 1 out of every 8 (96,200) adults on parole (Glaze & Bonczar, 2007). Although the number of studies of women released from prison is not large, reentry (like women's offending) is being recognized as a gendered phenomenon. Reentry and the process of desistance from crime are constituted by the interplay of subjective factors, such as identity, as well as with objective factors, such as jobs and housing (Burnett & Maruna, 2004). As with the majority of incarcerated women who are mothers (Mumola, 2000), maternal concerns are uppermost in the minds of reentering women—constituting a critical subjective aspect of their lives after prison. After their release, parenting women not only negotiate reentry, but they often must renegotiate the terms and conditions of their relations with children.

In this article, we examine a group of women on parole who are in the process of renegotiating motherhood in the context of what Richie (2001) refers to as “the co-occurrence of multiple demands” (p. 380). By virtue of their incarceration and other behaviors, these women are considered by society and themselves as “maternally unorthodox” (McMahon, 1995, p. 264). They are viewed as having violated both the tenets of the law and the prescriptions for gendered behavior (Schur, 1983). Culturally, motherhood holds a central place as an account of female gender and social adulthood (McMahon, 1995) even for mothers who have been incarcerated (Baunach, 1988; Bloom & Steinhart, 1993; Enos, 2001; LeFlore & Holston, 1989; Owen, 1998). So reassuming the role of mother holds the potential, as Runggay (2004) suggests, to structure a woman's desistance and serve as a transformational “script” after prison (p. 408). However, motherhood at the margins of social and economic life is also fraught with potential failure, given the immense challenges that greet women once the prison door closes behind them.

Formerly incarcerated women have significant needs that present barriers to their successful adjustment after prison. These needs are long-standing and serious (Schram, Koons-Witt, Williams, & McShane, 2006). Studies based on the pathways perspective, as described in Bloom, Owen, and Covington (2003) explain the relationship between certain histories (personal abuse and trauma, family instability, mental illness, substance abuse, troubled relationships, and criminal involvement) and economic and social marginality. Efforts at rehabilitation pay little attention to the pathways women travel to prison, journeys that are shaped by abuse, poverty, and the dynamics of gender inequality (Belknap, 2001; Bloom et al., 2003). Another set of long-standing issues is related to women's maternal concerns. Indeed, the issues that move women along a pathway to addiction

and offending take place during women's childbearing years, leaving them with a very complex maternal legacy to address after prison.

Our research adds to the literature on women's reentry by placing women's identities as mothers at the forefront of the process. After a review of relevant studies, we examine the backgrounds of a group of formerly incarcerated mothers, showing that their maternal experiences have long been troubled by contacts with both the criminal justice system and, in many cases, with child welfare. We then provide a profile of our sample that reveals their overall social marginalization, particularly in terms of education and work. Their postprison experiences are examined next with a focus on employment, debt, and residence. Narratives of women's struggles with the dual process of reentry and resumption of their maternal roles supplement the quantitative data in our study. These narratives create a complex portrait of maternal identity, one that recalls past hurts and present difficulties that few women are prepared to resolve. Last, we provide a set of policy and program recommendations that address the special needs associated with parenting women's reentry into society.

Examining Women's Reentry

With exceptions like O'Brien's (2001) book on the subject and articles by Covington (2003), Richie (2001), and Rumgay (2004), much of the growing literature on reentry has focused primarily on issues pertaining to male offenders. Covington (2003) points out that gender differences in pathways to crime, addiction, abuse, relationships, and homelessness are inherent in reentry and should be addressed at all levels of the criminal justice system. Schram et al. (2006) explain that women's needs are often both underassessed and unaddressed by corrections and parole, indicating that stable housing and employment are related to parole survival. Holtfreter, Reisig, and Morash (2004) found that poverty status of women after prison increased the odds of rearrest by almost 5 times and the odds of violation of supervision by more than 12 times. Uggen and Kruttschnitt (1998) argued that desistance from crime is gendered and that even though women are more likely to desist from crime and remain so for longer periods than men, women's reputations suffer more from stigma.

Many of the studies cited above are quantitative in orientation and geared toward the objective aspects of reentry. As the basis for our discussion of mothers on parole, we turn to a broader framework grounded in the desistance literature (Maruna, 2001; Maruna, LeBel, Mitchell, & Naples,

2004). Building on Maruna's work on desistance from crime, Rungay (2004) develops the concept of "scripts" or socially organized routines that have the potential to take one in a more conventional direction. Conventional identities—such as motherhood—represent possibilities for conventional scripts, Rungay notes. Maruna and LeBel (2003) suggest a strength-based narrative that focuses on strengthening the positive aspects of an offender's situation with an emphasis on the contributions that the individual can make to society, encouraging offenders to recast their personal narratives so that they see themselves as worthy, helpful members of society. But past negative experiences with motherhood may result in poor prospects for these maternal scripts to guide desistance as well as profound feelings of unworthiness. This is especially true in the face of numerous parole requirements coupled with the poor levels of social and economic support reentering mothers typically have. Following an overview of our methodology, we begin to map out the troubled maternal experiences that adversely impact the process of reentry.

Method

Our research utilized what Daly (1994) refers to as "deep" and "wide" sampling to examine characteristics and experiences of parenting women on parole supervision in Hawai'i in 2001. We examined the parole case files of all women on parole ($n = 240$) in that year, identified women with children ($n = 203$), and recruited 25 of these to be interviewed. Semistructured interviews were conducted among these 25 mothers who had been on parole for periods of time ranging from a few months to several years, with an average of 16 months. The life-history type interviews covered topics ranging from gender violence to experiences with the criminal justice system. The wide sample consists of largely quantitative data from women's institutional files. From these files, we present information on previous education, employment prior to prison, experiences with the criminal justice system, contacts with child welfare agencies, and relevant assessment data. Included in this analysis is an examination of the parole officer's case notes for each woman, providing us with follow-up data during the reentry process.

The quantitative data presented here are meant to be descriptive rather than analytical, as our purpose is to detail the interplay between subjective aspects of women's reentry, particularly their maternal experience, with the objective factors that limit and shape women's survival after prison. These

data present the backdrop against which women's narrative experiences are revealed. Although the women we interviewed did not constitute a random sample, their experiences are illustrative of critical experiences of mothers during reentry (Dodge & Pogrebin, 2001).

Troubled Motherhood

Case file data for these women are suggestive of the poor conditions that impacted their maternal experiences prior to prison. Prior to their incarceration, few women had any appreciable work history. More than half (55%) had dropped out of high school before reaching grade 12. Data on residence in the year prior to their incarceration reveals that women experienced considerable housing instability with nearly two thirds (65%) moving at least once. Consistent with the overrepresentation of Hawai'i's indigenous peoples seen in other correctional settings in the state, well over half (53.2%) of the women in this sample are of Native Hawaiian ancestry.¹ Just over half (51%) had been previously convicted for an offense, whereas 32% had a juvenile record. These women served an average of 22 months in prison and had been on parole an average of 16 months. The majority served time for drug offenses (45.8%) followed by property crimes (42.4%). Very few (8.9%) had committed violent crimes or "other" crimes (3%), such as weapons or public order charges. On average, these women first came into the criminal justice system charged with some offense at age 23. Early childbearing was the norm for these women; most were mothers by the age of 19. And our data also reveal that their maternal experiences overlapped with their criminal justice problems. The majority of these women (71%) already had at least one child at the time they were first sentenced for an offense. And in the year prior to their incarceration, 64% lived with their children.

The parenting situations of women in this study had been troubled for some time prior to their incarceration. Nearly 24% ($n = 48$) of the women in this study had been involved with the state's Department of Human Services (DHS), Child Welfare Services Division. That is, notations had been made in their presentencing reports of previous investigations for child maltreatment. In addition, the state (or some other jurisdiction) had terminated the parental rights of 17% ($n = 34$) of the mothers in this study for one or more children. (This does not include the number of women who voluntarily surrendered their parental rights to relatives or others.) Elsewhere, we (Brown & Bloom, in press) describe these dual modes

(criminal justice and child welfare systems) of adverse state intervention. These events are most likely to take place among poor women of color who are likely to share characteristics (e.g., women of color and residence in poor neighborhoods) that place them at risk for heightened state surveillance (Roberts, 2002; Roberts, 1995). Because this issue has not been systematically studied and theorized, we know very little about what impact the loss of children through the termination of parental rights might have on women's successful reentry. Changes in child welfare law, instituted by the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, accelerate the timetable to permanency planning for children in foster care. This change is having a growing impact on incarcerated mothers whose children go into foster care (Genty, 1998; Hayward & DePanfilis, 2007).

The picture is even more complicated when both parent and child are involved in the offense. The involvement of children in their parent's legal entanglements often comes as a result of their relationship to a mother who may have very little control over the conditions of her own life. Johnston (1995) found that roughly one in five children were present when their mothers were arrested. Of these, half were between the ages of 3 and 7. However, the issue of child and parental relationship after prison is further complicated when children are swept up at the time of arrest for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Lei, aged 46 when we met, was the parent of a son and daughter. After a long-term drug problem, she was arrested. This derailed her life and, coincidentally, that of her daughter:

You know, like me, I never tried to quit [drugs] before [prison]. I didn't get high when my kids were born, when I was pregnant with them. I was smart enough not to. But the drugs weren't as bad as in the end, when I got arrested. Then it was ice.² To me, the drug was more important than my kids. But I always had them [her children] with me. And I always tried to discipline them. But my daughter and I grew so far apart at the end [of her drug using] and then after I got arrested, we got back together again, close. So just that separation and that time out brought us back together again. The worst part about my crime was that I dragged my daughter along with me. She was in the house. So she got arrested when I got arrested. So that was really hard for me to deal with. Just that I had to worry about her. She can't get a job at the airport now because of the arrest. She's on probation for five years. I'll be off parole before she's off probation.

Women suffer a great deal of guilt and shame as a result of their children being in the wrong place at the wrong time or, worse, when children become complicit in elements of the crime. Nora's offense occurred in

1995 during a period when she was caught up in the crazy dynamics of the drug scene. Someone owed her money for a drug debt, and the person began to avoid Nora after the payment became very delinquent. Out of frustration, she and her boyfriend decided to break into the woman's house. Nora explained,

One night, me, my boyfriend, and my youngest son, I think he was 12 at the time, went there. Me and my ex-boyfriend were drunk. And it was like, "she has to be home this time! This is the last time." And she wasn't and like two dummies we broke into the house and took things out of her house as collateral until she pays.

The pair had Nora's son climb through the window, and he opened the door to the house. But the neighbors called the police, and all three were arrested—her son was taken into custody as an accomplice. The boy was released but sent later to juvenile court where he was given a term of probation—unfairly, Nora argued, because she and her boyfriend told him to enter the house.

In the following sections of this article, we turn to the experiences of these women as they emerge from prison on parole with the dual projects of reentering their communities and attempting to reassume their maternal identities. Renegotiating motherhood after prison is a long, tortuous route for which many women are largely unprepared. The motherhood that once seemed a natural right to most women is redefined as a privilege that can be revoked through forced separation or through the actions of child welfare. Even when legal barriers to reclaiming parenthood are absent, the opinion of affected relatives and children about the worthiness of the woman to return to her maternal status is frequently a controlling factor. She is often faced with continuing problematic relations with relatives and partners to sustain her parenting obligations—while trying to comply with the conditions of her parole.

Employment and Financial Status

O'Brien (2001) suggests that employment is the stage on which a woman's aspirations for reintegrating into society play out. The job search after prison poses frustration as well as dilemmas for women with inadequate education and little legitimate work experience. Institutional assessments report that 76% of these mothers had been employed less than 40%

of the year prior to their incarceration. Poor educational attainment is the norm for this population. Nearly 55% had less than a 12th grade education. Fewer than 10% had any postsecondary education. The best that most of these women can hope for are positions as low-wage workers. And although some of these women might have qualified, parole regulations discourage collecting welfare or unemployment.

Women on parole are faced with gathering and managing their family's resources. In addition to parole policies that require that ex-inmates seek and maintain employment, there are almost always expectations on the part of family members that parolees will contribute materially to the households where they live. Former inmates also emerge from prison with significant debt, owing money for fines, victim compensation, and child support (Levingston & Turetsky, 2007). The DHS also holds women accountable to reimburse the state for welfare payments made to their children while the women were incarcerated. Nancy said, "They're [DHS] coming after me now to repay what the family got while I was in prison."

Alicia is a 35-year-old woman of Hawaiian ancestry who had only one legitimate job about 10 years before going to prison. She was a long-time welfare recipient prior to her incarceration. After her release, she was able to transition at a women's residential furlough facility where she had been prior to her parole. After several months, Alicia left the facility and moved in with an older female cousin. She did not live with her children but remained very involved with them. She explained that she has "major wreckage from the past" and now has to pay out about \$500 a month for restitution and an old school loan. She is also paying child support for her 17-year-old son who lives with his paternal uncle. After leaving prison, her first job was at McDonalds, where she found the work extremely hard and the pay too low to make ends meet. Alicia found the job-hunting process itself intimidating and commented that former inmates are afraid to begin job hunting: "You feel like, you shouldn't apply because you'll be turned down. I'm like that, I don't want to go and apply because I'm not going to get it anyway." She now works for family members who have a business selling local specialty foods, and she works cleaning their church in exchange for rent.

Women reported problems that are fundamentally the same as those encountered by the working poor described in the literature on low-wage workers and welfare mothers (Edin & Lein, 1997; Ehrenreich, 2001). And as pointed out by Lynch and Sabol (2001), this group of former prisoners may well be in competition with welfare leavers for the same low-wage jobs. We learned that this group of women's passage through hard times is marked

by successive and sometimes concurrent low-wage jobs supplemented by “off the books” work such as babysitting. Part-time work offers no benefits and often applies stringent conditions to workers. The working poor with health problems are often barred from what one woman³ described as “sitting-down jobs” in offices by their lack of even rudimentary office skills. The major difference between the majority of paroled women in this study and the regular working poor is that parolees are required to hold jobs or prove their inability to do so. They are also subject to additional forms of surveillance and control. For these women, failure to work may be a violation of parole and may threaten their successful reentry.⁴

How do most mothers manage to make it economically on parole? Fortunate women receive substantial “in-kind” help from relations and friends. They also work rather hard themselves at staying employed and at finding new jobs when the old ones disappear. But their work situations, like their housing situations, are often tenuous and unstable in Hawai‘i’s service economy. A review of the case files shows that although women on parole struggle to remain employed, their work life is apt to be interspersed with unemployment and payments from welfare and disability income. Only a few are ever totally supported economically by others; support from a husband is a rarity. The data shown in Table 1 apply to the median 16 months that women in this population have been on parole.

Recall that the mandated employment status for parolees is that of full-time worker. Yet only about 37% ($n = 75$) attained this objective even once during the average 16-month parole period under observation. Of those who had ever worked during this period, approximately 18% ($n = 36$) had two to three different full-time jobs—and a few women ($n = 5$) had four or more different full-time jobs. Women on parole may also work part-time, sometimes combining these jobs—positions that generally have no benefits and are often temporary. Just over 25% ($n = 51$) of women on parole reported working part-time at some point. An added element of underemployment and job instability is job loss. More than a quarter of the women (27.6%) experienced job loss or unemployment at some time during parole. Parole policy, coupled with brevity of continuous employment, served to make most ineligible for unemployment benefits.

Another category of women (10.8%) was unemployed during the application period for welfare or disability income. Claimants can spend weeks or months waiting for their applications to be processed. Like other states in the era of welfare reform, Hawai‘i has been removing people from its welfare rolls. And in most cases, the Paroling Authority actively discourages parolees from receiving welfare, although some women with very

Table 1
Working Status and Income Source for Parenting
Women on Parole (*n* = 203)

Working Status or Income Source	One Time		Two to Three Times		Four or More Times		No Occasions	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Engaged in full-time work	75	36.9	36	17.7	5	2.5	87	42.9
Engaged in part-time work	51	25.1	27	13.3	8	3.9	117	57.6
Job loss/unemployment	56	27.6	15	7.4	0	0.0	132	65.0
Entitlement application/pending	22	10.8	1	0.5	0	0.0	180	88.7
Receiving welfare	41	20.2	7	3.4	0	0.0	155	76.4
Receiving SSI	11	5.4	0	0.0	0	0.0	192	94.6
Supported by others	10	4.9	0	0.0	0	0.0	193	95.1
Attending school and working ^a	20	9.9	1	0.5	0	0.0	182	89.7
Other source of income	7	3.4	0	0.0	1	0.5	195	96.1

Note: Supplemental Security Income (SSI) is granted in cases of physical or mental disability.

a. The demands on women who are on parole are stringent, but some do find the time and energy to attend school. About 10% (*n* = 20) were reported as having attended school on parole at least once. Some women attended vocational or technical classes, such as computer work or data entry, while others attended college classes. All of these students were working either full- or part-time during this period.

young children received Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). However, there are occasions when women on parole receive public assistance from TANF, general state assistance (an extremely restricted category of help), or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) payments for disabilities. Women in the latter category are those, for example, who are in the mental health unit or those whose physical or psychological disabilities make them unable to work. Just over 20% of women were reported as receiving welfare payments (either TANF or other funds), whereas about 5% received SSI payments at some point during their paroles. There are women who, at times, receive full financial support from their relatives or a spouse—but these few (about 5% or 10) women are exceptions. The final category of women was reported to be receiving funds from other sources (3.4%) at some point. For example, a few reported receiving child support, whereas others received Social Security for a child whose other parent was deceased.

Table 2
Living Situations at Release (*n* = 202)

Living Status on Release	Parolees With Dependent Children		Parolees With Adult Children	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Lives in (her) own place	3	0.8	0	0.0
Lives with spouse or partner	32	17.0	2	14.3
Lives with adult relatives	87	46.3	6	42.9
Lives with adult friends	19	10.1	2	14.3
Lives in program setting or clean and sober house	47	25.0	4	28.6
Total	188	^a	14	^a

Note: There were 202 parenting women at the time of their release on parole; one woman became a mother for the first time during the period she was paroled.

a. Percentage does not add up to 100 because of rounding.

Release and Reunion

According to the data we examined, the 203 women in this sample were mothers to some 576 children in 2001, when 42% of children for whom data were available were aged 12 years or under. Nearly 1 in 4 (23%) were between the ages of 13 and 17 years, and more than a third were aged 18 years or older. Table 2 reports the data on parenting women and their release status and whether or not they had dependent children.

Only 3 parenting women in this population had the resources to set up their own households after prison. During their incarceration, women may imagine having a place for themselves and their children, a vision that sometimes includes the spouse or partner from the past, but this was uncommon. As we found in our interviews, women often were frequently paroled to the domiciles where their children had been living. Most were anxious to rejoin their children, even mothers who were not living with their children just before their imprisonment. Sometimes the long-anticipated reunion with children was delayed. Of the 188 women with dependent children (aged 17 years and under in 2001), 89 or 47.3% reunited with children immediately after prison. Some women went to live with adult children, along with some younger children in a few cases.

Delaying reunification can be helpful, giving a woman time to make adjustments for herself and to prepare to take up the work of childrearing again. But the cultural imperative to reunite with children is strong, and

caregivers have often become exhausted and expect women to resume their parental responsibilities as soon as possible. Terri, the mother of six adult and adolescent children, was able to get some time to adjust before reuniting with her kids. This was a choice on her part, based on guidance she received from a counselor in the prison's therapeutic community. She might have had a longer transitional period, but the reunion happened suddenly when her mother began to have trouble with one of Terri's adolescent sons. And at about the same time, the grandmother felt she was unable to care for a second son. Soon after, her daughter arrived in the household. Terri felt completely overwhelmed and unready to cope with the three adolescents. According to Terri, since her incarceration, "We've all been in transition," and they have all had to work hard at keeping the household intact.

Few women in this study were in a position to manage the situation as well as Terri, who received support from a competent counselor and had relatives to continue to care for children after prison (as well as an aunt who provided cheap housing). Nor was it the norm to see the careful planning and thinking that went into Terri's decision along with reliable support from kin. For the most part, the same adverse dynamics found in women's employment situations are reflected in significant housing instability. Over the average 16 months on parole, just over one third (35.9%) experienced no changes in residence. More than half (53.7%) moved between one and three times, whereas 10.3% experienced four or more changes.

Reclaiming Motherhood

We have examined the challenges that women experience with finding employment and housing for themselves and their children during their return to society. These are important aspects of reentry and reunification, but they represent the objective context of this process. In this section, we explore the emotional content and the meaning of the maternal role. Bonds of affection are not necessarily severed when women go to prison, despite the difficulties separation poses for relationships. Reestablishing a parental relationship that has been damaged by separation and residual conflicts going back years can be overwhelming. Our interviews revealed that even when ties of affection remain strong, problems with children and caregivers pose a series of challenges to fundamental aspects of maternal experience.

Maile had been away for 5 years, incarcerated in a prison in Oklahoma,⁵ where she never got to see her children. She described her homesickness and said that the prospect of reuniting with her children "meant everything"

to her during this separation. Yet she admitted being afraid too. She had been away a long time, and life had gone on in some ways for her. But this was true to a far greater extent for her three children who were aged 11 through 19 when she was first sentenced. After all, the children had been going to school, learning about the world, and forming relationships outside the family as well as with other family members. Maile's sister served as the principal caregiver during this time, taking on the tasks of motherhood in her absence. When Maile entered the household after prison, she loved how her children hugged and kissed her—but then watched as their attention returned to their own activities. She felt like an outsider.

Ties of affection remained, but she felt that her authority as a parent was gone. What was she to be now in the lives of her children? Her sister, who was up-to-date on each child's activities and progress in school, was the one the children went to with questions or when they needed something. Maile's sister knew which papers had to be signed, who the children's teachers were, and what each child was supposed to be doing. Maile watched herself evolve into an ancillary figure, one that merely provided services such as laundry and cooking. It was her sister who continued to serve as liaison with the outside world of schools and children's activities. Paroled women like Maile are fortunate to have this level of support from relatives, but they may still feel peripheral to these households that were cobbled together out of necessity and distress.

Women are centrally involved in two transitions when they rejoin community life: their own process of reintegration and the transitions of their loved ones. Betty, who joined her three younger children after prison, explained how difficult the process had been. Her children, aged 10 through 15, had to change schools to come to live with her. She recalls that there was crying, fighting, and screaming in their household as this readjustment process unfolded. She accompanied her daughter to school for an entire week just to make sure the girl stayed at school for the day. For her part, Betty's daughter wanted her mother to know what she was going through as the child of an ex-offender. Even now, Betty says her days can be stressful. Like other working, single mothers, she talked about coming home and being grouchy about the house's state of disorder, and she "yells about it." "But they know," she explains, "it's all in a normal day." For women on parole, then, successful reintegration means getting to put up with the stresses and strains of parenting teenagers, going to classes, being tired of messy houses, and working low-wage jobs. It means taking up the reins of 21st-century parenting—with all its complexities—with the added dimension of being under the scrutiny of law enforcement agents.

Parental Capital

The idea of parental authority as an aspect of maternal identity is ingrained in these essentially working-class families. Discipline and its functions, such as monitoring, accountability, advising, and handing out sanctions, are as much a part of motherhood as love and caring. For women whose incarceration occasioned long-term separation, this aspect of motherhood, like others related to emotional bonding, is likely to become fragmented. Conviction, incarceration, and absence have eroded parental authority in both its moral and practical dimensions. Mother remains a loving figure, but her stature as a moral leader in the home has been irrevocably discredited in very public ways. She has lost the moral rectitude that is culturally central to motherhood (McMahon, 1995). Moreover, she may no longer serve as liaison between her children and the outside world of schools and activities even if she was able to do so before prison.

Clearly, this erosion of parental capital begins before prison, but incarceration serves to intensify children's troubles while leaving mothers in no position to help (Golden, 2005). Gayle explains about problems she has been having with her daughter, who was 14 at the time of our interview. Gayle wants parenting classes now to help her with the problems she has with her daughter. "Girls sometimes push," Gayle sighs. She remarks that during her incarceration, her daughter, who had been living with Gayle's ex-husband, was placed in a home for children with behavior problems. Gayle feels that her incarceration precipitated these troubles and says, "I know she had trouble because I wasn't there." Another former inmate reported that many of the women she had been incarcerated with became grandmothers for the first time in prison.

A mother's incarceration often sets in motion some of the same events that speed girls and women along a pathway to prison. The intersection of women's incarceration with the life course development of daughters and sons needs to be understood as an interactive process, rather than simply a matter of emergent adolescent problems resulting from poor parental control. Daughters are subject to many of the same stressors, risks, and receding choices that shaped their mothers' pathways to prison. Women perceive that an essential part of mothering daughters means protecting girls from problems such as delinquency, school separation, and early pregnancy. But this cannot be effectively done from behind bars—although women will try any means available to them to accomplish this. But even women living in the poor communities of the free world face serious odds in attempting to protect their daughters and sons from danger. Incarceration erodes women's confidence that they can perform one of the most essential tasks of motherhood:

protection of children in a dangerous world. Caregivers on the outside may step forward to fulfill this role. However, this is an aspect of maternal identity that a mother is really never able to relinquish. More than anything else, this is the basis for the anguish that was obvious among women we interviewed and that endured far beyond their time in prison.

Conflicts with caregivers over children and communication failures while women are in prison are major problems reported by women in this study—and in the literature on incarcerated women (Baunach, 1988; Bloom & Steinhart, 1993; Enos, 2001; Johnston, 1995). Communication with children through letters, phone calls, and visits while incarcerated strongly shapes women's parenting after prison. Women wanted to know how their children were faring on the outside. However, aware of their powerlessness to intercede at a distance, they could be deeply disturbed by hearing of their children's problems. Often, women felt that the emotional turbulence was due as much to the ways the message was being conveyed as by its content. One woman, incarcerated in Hawai'i, arranged to call her child at school in the counselor's office. The child's grandmother had been providing this inmate with inaccurate and slanted reports of the child's problems in school in ways meant to provoke her. However, not all women can manage the situation as well from prison; very few have such sympathetic school contacts to rely on.

Caregivers frequently have unresolved issues with the imprisoned mothers of their wards and, stressed by their added burdens, may express hostility toward the inmates (Enos, 1998, 2001). Women reported that caregivers, understandably frustrated over their troubled charges, would use phone time with the inmate to berate her over her children's problems. This is a typical experience, where the caregiver gives upsetting news in a way that gets the woman "all twisted up," as one woman phrased it.

Nancy was one of the few women with a husband to care for her two younger children during her almost 4 years of incarceration. But the problems she left behind in terms of her children were worsened by the separation and continued to overwhelm her even on the outside. Nancy did not want the state to get custody of her children and subsequently made her husband, who was not the children's biological father, their legal guardian. Having no other options and not wanting to lose her children to foster care or risk having them separated from one another, Nancy felt she had no choice, even though, as she explained, her husband had no "blood relation" to her daughters.

I didn't lose my rights; I never got involved with CPS [Child Protective Services]. I voluntarily did it [gave custody to her husband] because I didn't

want the state to grab them. Because I knew that once the State found out I was incarcerated, this man [her husband] has no blood relationship [and] that the State would come and take them.

Nancy admitted this custody situation was fraught with problems. She cried a little as she explained how her husband verbally abused the girls, and she admitted that these fights sometimes escalated to hitting and punching—to the point where neighbors complained. In prison, she was not fully aware of the struggles at home. On parole, she is now in the predicament of living in a dependent relationship with the same husband who abused her children because she signed their custody over to him. To regain custody, she will have to go back to family court. Until then, she works two jobs so that she can eventually get her own place and leave the relationship. Meanwhile, she is faced with trying to keep her daughters safe in this troubled household. Although Nancy's actions are hard to justify from a conventional cultural (and possibly legal) perspective, her decisions do make a kind of sense. The cultural logic of motherhood compelled Nancy to retain her social and legal claims to her children through signing over her parental rights to an unqualified man. She retains a belief that she can manage, at least temporarily, to control and even prevail over this situation through determination and hard work.

Many women like Nancy force themselves to quell their immediate anxieties in the hope that a more secure future can be forced into being by their own effort and choices. Their actions, however, are often stymied by the social and economic realities that impinge on their best strategies. Nancy is attempting to renegotiate a maternal identity that is grounded in providing materially for her daughters, along with providing a safe household. Her plan for the present is to continue to work 80 hours a week at her two low-wage jobs so that she can afford a down payment on a house. She cannot afford (in economic terms) to consider breaking up the relationship with this husband because he contributes financially to the household. Such dilemmas are common to the complex paths mothers travel to survive on parole, while keeping their families intact. In the following section, we address the lack of state-level and community support to ease women's transitions back into an often-problematic family life.

Preparation for Reentry and Community Support

Mothers receive very little preparation during prison for the rigors of life during reentry. This is despite the proliferation of cognitive skills and parenting programs in correctional settings. When examined more closely,

the content of these and other contemporary programs fails to deal with the themes of deprivation, lack of social capital, violence, and addiction that shape women's realities before and after prison (Kendall, 2002; Kendall & Pollack, 2003). Women may well find these programs culturally alienating and largely irrelevant to the real conditions of their lives during reentry.

Momi is the never-married parent of six children ranging in ages from 11 to 21 at the time of our interview. Momi grew up in an urban neighborhood of Honolulu, populated mostly by poor and working-class local people and immigrants. Her incarceration for a drug offense took her to Texas and Oklahoma, putting many miles between her and her children. Momi, who identifies herself as Hawaiian, found the messages implicit in the parenting classes to be ineffective and ludicrous, given the harsh realities of her life: poverty and a generally troubled intimate life. She finds it impossible to employ the parenting "skills" she learned in prison:

Like me, I don't know how to express too much love. I can express plenty emotion, like crying, I can do that! [laughs]. And hate, I can do that, but love . . . I can't sit down with my kids and talk to them and ask them what's the matter with them, what's going on with them, what went on with their life . . . without their saying something and triggering me and I get all pissed off. I don't know how to do that kind of thing.

When asked about whether parenting classes in prison helped prepare her for rejoining her children, Momi laughed, saying that the classes represented the "white man's way of thinking" rather than local childrearing practices. She continued, "[Y]ou [meaning whites] send your kid to a time out or you sit down with them. You don't find too many Hawaiians who'll do that." What Momi wanted was a way to control her children and to prevent them from running with local gangs in her crime-infested neighborhood.

Women emerged from prison to find that their children had been in trouble with the law, had problems with drugs or early pregnancy, were doing poorly in school, or basically were not doing well. They often felt they needed to do something about these situations—a central aspect of being a mother—but what? They often see their children navigating the same path that led to their own troubles with the law. Alicia worries about her 18-year-old daughter, who was using drugs when Alicia first came home from prison. At this point, even though the drug use seems to be in abeyance, she said,

Right now I can tell that she's not doing drugs but she's not doing anything productive with her life. She lives with her aunt and boyfriend, but she doesn't have any income and the boyfriend doesn't have any income. And she's doing the same thing that I was doing.

Alicia wishes that her daughter could find something to do, especially because she feels this idleness makes the young woman vulnerable to the drug activities going on in the rural community where she lives. She would like her daughter to get some vocational counseling. She worries about her son, too, whose problems are less obvious but troubling to her nonetheless. When asked about what services her children might benefit from, such as counseling, she was somewhat puzzled. No one she knew ever got any family counseling, and it seemed to be unclear to her. However, after an explanation of these services, she remarked,

Probably my daughter [would need counseling]. I think my son, too. When I see him now, we talk a little bit but he still doesn't open up. I think that he has had harm in that he doesn't talk about his feelings. I think he should have someone to go to share what he really feels about me not being there, you know, all this time.

Women in this study all wanted their children to do well, whether they had custody of them or not. Several noted that the rewards of motherhood include watching their children grow and accomplish things in life. These women suffer damage to their identities as mothers when their children fail to do well. And they tend to blame themselves, while overlooking the fact that both they and their children grew up in circumstances where disadvantage and trouble shaped family life.

Not only are women's personal resources in aiding their children scant, but they were strikingly unaware of sources of outside help that might assist their children. And in fact, it did not seem to occur to many of them that outside help might be available. Every interview included a discussion about what sort of services might be helpful to them and their children. Although one woman was utilizing a family peace center in Honolulu, they were almost always puzzled by the question, and the possibilities for help did not seem at all apparent to them. In large part, this may have reflected their isolation from nonpunitive helping agencies or the fact that appropriate services are not reaching into this group of mothers. But from a broader perspective, what seems significant is women's basic alienation from social institutions and a lack of connection to the world of schools and other community resources. Asking for help could mean additional rejection and even formal surveillance they can ill afford. Given the condemnation and shaming many women experience through their contact with the criminal justice, education, and social welfare systems, their reluctance is understandable.

Women who do seek help for their children find that resources such as treatment are limited and that they are faced with having to go to punitive

agencies for help. Anna Maria's 21-year-old daughter has been diagnosed with schizophrenia and uses drugs from time to time. Like other parents in this situation, she has run the gamut of seeking help for her daughter—from substance abuse treatment centers that offer dual-diagnosis programs to more focused mental health day treatment services. She reported that her daughter has been “kicked out of these programs,” leaving the family frantic. As a last resort, she called the police, and the young woman is now on probation as a result of threatening her little brother. Anna Maria is in the position of trying to protect the younger child while attempting, with little success, to find help for the older one. She feels both children need her protection, although in different ways. Yet Anna Maria cannot do much more than watch as her sick child navigates the Scylla and Charybdis of inadequate mental health care systems and jail.

Anna Maria had to shepherd her older sons safely through their own brush with the law a few years ago. When their father's house was raided for drugs, the case that precipitated her own incarceration, she managed to keep her adolescent sons from being arrested. Interceding with the law to keep children out of the system is a necessary part of managing risk for these mothers, for whom keeping sons out of the clutches of the police is a significant part of childrearing. This is a form of knowledge that is essential for mothers because the risk of criminal justice involvement is so great for young women and men of color. For White, middle-class women, parenting concerns generally consist of speeding sons and daughters along the path to the right schools and jobs, always keeping the focus on the future. The lives of more advantaged children are not without trouble, but for them the idea of a risky present resides along with the trust in a good future of education, jobs, a comfortable family life, and social mobility. But for mothers such as those in this study, a different worldview prevails. Their children's futures are continually imperiled by the threats of life in poverty-stricken communities, where gangs offer a practical life path to youth of color. In these contexts that are so fraught with the dangers of drug use, violence, and gang involvement, the risk of getting involved with the police is ever present.

Conclusion

Although motherhood may provide a conventional identity script to structure and motivate a woman's successful reentry, we find that their past maternal experiences have been profoundly troubled by socioeconomic disadvantage, addiction, violence, and contact with child welfare as well as

problems with the law. Even when women resume their parental roles after prison, their capacity to redeem parental capital is reduced by circumstances seldom within their control. Having been imprisoned has damaged their maternal identities in their own eyes and those of their intimates. This, coupled with previous behavior, can have the effect of nullifying any claims to the status of “good mother” (Jensen & DuDeck-Biondo, 2005).

Conditions such as poverty, racism, gender violence, and social marginalization not only led these women to prison but, for many, meant adverse actions by child welfare authorities, including the loss of their children to the state. Although many women see that their children are caught up in the same contexts and conditions that shaped their own trajectories to prison, they are likely to blame themselves for their children’s outcomes. In the absence of a great deal of support, the role of motherhood as a conventional identity and script for reform remains an open question in women’s desistance without some significant level of state and community assistance.

Mothers leaving prison join households where they are peripheral members, often feeling like interlopers as they attempt to exercise the duties of motherhood. 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. This is confirmed by the fact that she is under the watchful eye of the law. Although bonds of affection endure despite the separation incarceration entails, the woman’s identity as a mother has been undermined by damage to her position as a moral agent and guide.

Given their preprison experiences as mothers, they lack confidence in their own agency to work things out. In her book on homeless mothers, Deborah Connolly (2000) explores the contingent and shifting conditions within which these indigent women attempt to parent. She notes that popular understandings of homeless mothers, who negotiate motherhood within a context of domestic violence, poverty, and homelessness, depict these women as either helpless victims of personal and social factors outside of their control or as choice makers responsible for their own problems. The women in this study, like those in Connolly’s, ought to be understood as “limited agents” (Connolly, 2000, p. 79), constantly addressing dilemmas that would overwhelm the average person. Added to this is the slippage between ideological versions of motherhood and the series of losses and troubles posed by the real lives of these women. The emphasis on choice making and the power of the individual to transform herself, the keystone of modern rehabilitation strategies, talks past these realities (Hannah-Moffat, 2004). Cognitive skills classes and similar approaches stressed by contemporary corrections place an enormous emphasis on individual

agency and creating personal accountability (Duguid, 2000; Garland, 2001). Penal authorities imagine that the limited classes and rehabilitation programs will make a difference in the lives women lead after prison and prevent further trouble with the law. Although parenting classes may provide useful information on issues such as child development, we conclude that these reform projects are often irrelevant to this population as well as culturally alienating.

We have argued that both subjective and objective realities are important in shaping the postincarceration period for mothers and their children. Women's own accounts argue for a more comprehensive approach to reentry that includes housing and financial assistance (Holtfreter et al., 2004). Even more, their narratives argue for significant changes in policy that intervene "upstream." Policies need to refocus holistically on issues along the life course that shape women's trajectories into offending in the first place. Investment in educational opportunities for girls and women of color needs to be expanded in poor communities (Richie, 2001). Substance abuse treatment programs that provide a safe haven from gender violence as well as treatment for women (accompanied by children) need to be made far more available. Given the damaging impact of prison on women's lives and its general ineffectiveness as a vehicle for reform, women who commit drug and other nonviolent crimes need to be diverted from the criminal justice system. Legal reforms that highlight the mitigating effect of child-care responsibilities need to be incorporated into sentencing guidelines (Engel & Munger, 1996; Enos, 2001; Flavin, 2001). When a woman becomes involved with the criminal justice system, child welfare agencies need to work harder to coordinate support for her and her children rather than serve as another mechanism of punishment.

Overall, there is a critical need to develop a system of support to provide assistance to women who are returning to their communities. A case management approach has been found to work effectively with women, in that it addresses their multiple treatment needs in a comprehensive gender-responsive way. Parole policy should address community needs as well as individual needs to improve outcomes for women. Assistance is needed in the areas of housing, education, job training, employment, transportation, family reunification, child care, drug and alcohol treatment, peer support, and aftercare. Women transitioning from prison to the community must navigate myriad systems that often provide fragmented services, and this can be a barrier to successful reintegration. The planning for reentry into the community must begin as soon as the woman begins serving her sentence, not during the final 30 to 60 days. Wraparound models and other

integrated approaches can also be very effective because they address multiple goals and needs in a coordinated way and facilitate access to services (Bloom, 2004).

Although motherhood is a site of legal and social regulation, there is no denying that it is a powerfully motivating force in the identities of many incarcerated women. With adequate material and social support, far more mothers than at present will be able to make a contribution to the well being of their families and communities as they navigate the reentry process.

Notes

1. This number is more than double their rate (22%) in the population in the state of Hawai'i.

2. Smokable form of methamphetamine endemic in Hawai'i.

3. Nora suffered from arthritis in both knees and disabling headaches. Her lack of health care hampered her application for disability payments because she could not afford a visit to the doctor to begin the application process.

4. Work is a standard condition of parole, although exceptions can be made in the case of disability. Parolees are expected to "seek and retain employment," and they must gain approval from their parole officers prior to changing employment.

5. Since 1995, Hawai'i has been easing its overcrowding situation by sending prisoners to mainland correctional facilities.

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