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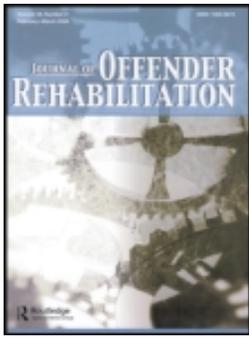
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## Mothering as a Life Course Transition: Do Women Go Straight for Their Children?

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## **Mothering as a Life Course Transition: Do Women Go Straight for Their Children?**

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*In this study, qualitative, in-depth interviews were conducted with 100 formerly incarcerated mothers to explore the relationship between attachment to children and desistance from criminal behavior. Exploratory data analysis revealed that mothers do believe that children play important roles in their desistance, consistent with the tenets of life course theory. However, children were also described as sources of great stress, which may in turn promote criminal behavior. Women also related desistance to reliance on self and a higher power, and to a desire to avoid future involvement with the criminal justice system. The article concludes with a call for more research on women's desistance, and increased consideration of parent-child relationships in corrections policy decision making.*

*KEYWORDS* attachment, children, desistance, life course theory, mothers, reentry

### INTRODUCTION

As American prisons continue to fill with low-level drug and property offenders, criminologists likewise look for ways to prevent recidivism and encourage desistance (see Kazemian, 2007 for a review). Knowledge about “what works” is growing (e.g., Vera Institute of Justice, 2010), though research has largely failed to influence public policy. Correctional systems have not only failed to “correct” those under their purview, with post-incarceration recidivism rates estimated above 60% (Langan & Levin, 2002), but it appears that “coercive mobility” has made individuals, families, and communities

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weaker, poorer, and even more prone to crime (Clear, Rose, Waring, & Scully, 2003).

What we do know, first and foremost, is that people commit less crime as they age, across all demographic categories (Steffensmeier & Allan, 2000; Thornberry, 2005). Much of the focus on desistance, however, has been from the perspective of life course theorists. Consistent research findings from this perspective have shown that prosocial ties, such as those to marriage partners, employment, education, military service, and employment, decrease recidivism (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002; Laub & Sampson, 2003; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Sampson, Laub, & Wimer, 2006). Most of this research, however, has been done with men. Very little research has been done to investigate other bonds which may be particularly protective for women, such as those to children. Specifically, though most mothers intend to reunify with their children upon their release (Richie, 2001), we do not know the impact of such reunification on mothers' desistance from criminal behavior. This investigation seeks to fill that gap by exploring the relationship between attachment to children and women's desistance behaviors. It is expected that such research, both practically grounded and theoretically structured, may increase the body of knowledge about women's desistance and, in turn, our understanding of what works after incarceration, and may further define the purview of life course theory. Using qualitative data and an exploratory analytical approach, this article examines data from 100 in-depth interviews with formerly incarcerated mothers.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Life course theory, with its focus on transitions and on the social bonds associated with them, has been particularly useful to our understanding of desistance behavior. As the primary theorists in the life course field, Sampson and Laub theorized that life events increase social control and the occurrence of structured routine activities. Using largely longitudinal data with male respondents, Sampson and Laub (1990, 1993, 2003; Laub, Nagin, & Sampson, 1998) have found that later life events, specifically marriage, military experience, and employment, are significantly and inversely correlated with criminal and delinquent behavior. They have concluded over the years that such turning points, related to bonds and social capital, facilitate positive changes in behavior, despite earlier criminal behavior.

As with much criminological research, life course studies have been dominated by examinations of male behavior, which may have undermined our understanding of women's transitions and the contexts in which they occur. Romantic relationships, for example, were theorized by Sampson and Laub (1990) to act as a turning point, and subsequent research indicated that the protective effects of marriage (Sampson & Laub, 2005) and, in particular,

positive romantic relationships (Capaldi, Kim, & Owen, 2008) are quite strong for men. Specifically, Capaldi et al. (2008) found that the desistance effects of romantic relationships for men depend on both relationship stability and the antisocial behavior of romantic partners. However, given the particular likelihood of domestic violence in women's romantic relationships (Brown, Miller, & Maguin, 1999), one might expect that this protective effect may not be nearly as strong for women as it is for men (Leverentz, 2006).

In addition, life course researchers have also found consistent desistance effects of steady employment for men (Laub et al., 1998; Laub & Sampson, 1993; Sampson & Laub, 1993). Formerly incarcerated women, however, have far lower educational achievement and fewer job skills than their male counterparts (Blitz, 2006; O'Brien, 2001; Tonkin, Dickie, Alemagno, & Grove, 2004). This presumably makes it harder for them to find employment and often results in compensation at a far lower rate, potentially undercutting the protective effects of employment. In fact, Giordano et al. (2002) found that such protective effects of employment, true in studies of white males in the 1950s, was not necessarily true for a sample with mixed gender and racial identities in the 1990s.

It is imperative, therefore, for life course theorists interested in women's desistance to investigate the ways in which the protective effects of transitions may be different for women than for men. Parenting is an underexamined transition that may have dramatic effects on women's desistance, given the particular importance of children to women's lives before, during, and after incarceration. Almost two thirds (62%) of women in state prison report being a parent. Most incarcerated mothers (64%) report that they lived with at least one of their children in the month prior to their arrest or just prior to their incarceration. In addition, while the children of incarcerated men are most likely to live with their mothers in the community, only 37% of the children of incarcerated women live with their fathers. During a mother's incarceration, children are more likely to live with grandmothers (45%), other relatives (23%), or in a foster home or agency (11%; Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Most incarcerated women report that they intend to reunify with their children upon release (Richie, 2001), and the fact that most incarcerated mothers engage in extensive contact with their children may serve to confirm that anticipation (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008).

Most research that has been done on parenting and desistance has had conflicting results, and fails to take into account the complicated nature of becoming a parent (see Moloney, MacKenzie, Hunt, & Joe-Laidler, 2009 for a review). Two recent studies show that becoming a father can encourage desistance for criminally involved men (Edin, Nelson, & Paranal, 2004; Moloney et al., 2009), although the effects of such a transition is often mediated by the practicalities of both parenting and criminal involvement. In 2001, O'Brien provided conceptual support for the idea that mothering after release is both desired and a source of stress, and more recently, Brown and

Bloom (2009) found that the maternal identity acted as a motivator, but that the challenges of reentry often interfered with success in the community.

There are many reasons why parenting may emerge as a protective transition consistent with life course theory, and women's involvement in the lives of children may mean that these social bonds to children may be stronger and more protective than they are for men. A few studies have emerged in recent years that examine the role of transitions such as mothering in women's desistance. For example, in their study of young people and crime, Graham and Bowling (1995) found that for females the greatest influence on desistance came from having children. All of the female respondents in their sample reported that their children had positively changed their lives, identities, outlook, sense of responsibility, and behavior. Their work strongly supports the idea that the presence of children changes the routines of parents, particularly mothers, who report fewer contacts with criminal peers and locations which were conducive to subjects' previous criminal behavior. Similarly, in a large quantitative study of poor young women in Denver, Kreager, Matsueda, and Erosheva (2010) found that motherhood was associated with desistance from delinquency and drug use. In line with life course theory, they suggest that motherhood acts as the primary "turning point" for women in a way that marriage, considered unlikely in poor communities of color, does not.

On the other hand, mothering may bring with it a number of complications that are not inherent in transitions frequently highlighted by life course theorists. Marriage and employment, for example, may increase a person's resources simply by definition. The additional demands placed on a parent (e.g., additional food and clothing costs, housing requirements, and child care), however, may act as stressors, and counteract the effectiveness of the bond as a prosocial transition. It might also be imagined that increased contact with other institutions, such as the family court system, might exert a new social control in the lives of reentering women attempting to reunify. Richie (2001) found that reentering mothers faced considerable problems upon reentry, many of them due to lack of resources, which may mediate the positive effects of children on desistance. However, Richie also found that women's relationships with their children were stabilizing when there was financial and other support for their parenting.

## METHODOLOGY

Due to the dearth of research with women on this topic, the goals of this study are exploratory, with the intention of identifying potential variables for future deductive study. Therefore, the sampling method is purposive, and the results are not generalizable to the larger population of formerly incarcerated women.

## Data

In-depth interviews were conducted with 100 formerly incarcerated women in New York City who volunteered to participate in the study over a 7-month period from October 2005 to April 2006. A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit participants: The study was advertised with the use of presentations and fliers at organizations serving formerly incarcerated people and via the ensuing word-of-mouth. Although the respondents were not sampled randomly, the experiences detailed here are illustrative of critical experiences of mothers reentering the community after incarceration (Dodge & Pogrebin, 2001).

Twenty-four respondents were recruited after presentations by the principal investigator at three different service provider locations. Another 23 respondents were recruited because of their responses to fliers posted at service locations. These respondents either called the principal investigator to set up an interview or spoke to the principal investigator who was on-site at a particular time listed on the flier. Finally, 48 women found out about the study through word-of-mouth from women who had been interviewed.

The interview with the principal investigator was arranged once a respondent expressed interest in the study. All of the interviews were conducted on a face-to-face basis by the principal investigator to maximize reliability, and took place in a private space, usually an office at the recruitment location. One interview took place at a fast food restaurant suggested by the respondent. Interviews lasted an average of 25 minutes, though the length varied considerably among respondents (the shortest interview lasted just over 10 minutes, and the longest lasted almost 75 minutes). Before being interviewed, each woman was given a copy of an informed consent document, which she was then read to avoid literacy barriers. The informed consent described the interview as “a set of questions about who I am, about my relationships with my children and my spouse, about my job, and about my criminal behavior.” No women refused to participate in the study after they were given and signed the informed consent document. Participants were given \$10 in cash for participating in the interview. All participants were required to have given birth to at least one child at some point in their lives, to have been incarcerated at some point in their lives, and to be over 18 at the time of the interview. Interviews were tape-recorded with a digital recorder with the respondent’s consent. The interviews were transcribed by the principal investigator for later qualitative data analysis.

Both respondents being interviewed at service provider locations and those interviewed at other locations were advised that participation in the study was unrelated to any services that they were receiving. Respondents were likewise informed that they could end the interview at any time without penalty, and that they would still receive the \$10 remuneration for the partial interview.

## Measures

The data presented in this article are excerpted from a larger study about women's desistance from criminal behavior. All 100 respondents were interviewed using a survey instrument made up of 61 questions, a mixture of qualitative and quantitative measures. The interview began with a set of four demographic questions included in order to confirm eligibility for the study. In addition, women were asked a set of ten questions about employment, housing, substance abuse, and racial identity. A set of 36 questions about respondents and their children followed, including questions about attachment to their children and their reunification with those children after incarceration. A set of ten questions assessed respondents' current and past involvement in the criminal justice system and whether or not they were desisting from criminal behavior at the time of the interview. Finally, respondents were asked an open-ended question about the reasons for their desistance or lack thereof in the following way: "Do you think that there's a connection between that change/lack thereof and your reunification with your children/seeking reunification/not seeking reunification? Tell me about that." If children were not mentioned as a response to that question, the interviewer probed the respondent to see whether children had any role in her desistance. It is on this last qualitative item that the current analysis is focused.

## Data Analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded with respondent consent and transcribed by the principal investigator in preparation for analysis using a modified version of a systematic procedure for analyzing qualitative data developed by Moustakas (1994). First, the principal investigator conducted multiple readings of each interview section, after which all reasons for desistance were noted and color coded by hand on each interview transcript. Second, horizontalization of the data was conducted to organize significant statements into clusters of meanings, which were carefully examined and defined. Third, identified themes were then assigned codes for each respondent to represent its presence or absence in interview responses. This allowed for the coding of multiple meaning units for each respondent, some of whom attributed their desistance to more than one reason. It was then possible to interpret reoccurring significant statements, by which process themes emerged in their final forms, which consisted of labels, definitions, and supporting data. The final product is the composite description of respondents' experiences presented here.

Given the length of the interview instrument, interview transcripts were often quite long and dense. However, because the current analysis focuses on responses to a single question, it was possible to summarize all respondent reasons for desistance without excluding information for the sake of space.

## Missing Data

The interviews of four respondents were excluded from content analysis because of ineligibilities discovered during the interviews, after screening questions had shown them to be eligible: One respondent was excluded because she had no history of involvement in the criminal justice system. Another respondent was excluded because she had never given birth to any children. A third respondent was excluded because she was court-mandated to live in an Alternative to Incarceration program at the time of the study. A fourth respondent was excluded because her severe mental illness led the interviewer to question whether the daughter she spoke about existed and because her answers to many of the interview questions were incoherent.

## THE STUDY SAMPLE

Although the participants in this study were not chosen at random, their profiles and experiences (see Table 1) are similar to many women incarcerated and reentering the community after incarceration nationally and in New York City (O'Brien, 2001; Women's Prison Association, 2003a, 2003b).

The majority of respondents (73%) reported that they had not reunified with their children at the time of the interview. Of those who were not reunified, 66% were seeking to reunify with at least one of their children. On the other hand, a quarter of respondents reported reunifying with at least one of their children. When respondents reunified with more than one of their children at multiple dates, the earliest date of reunification was used. For those respondents who were reunified, most had been reunified for less than a year (62%); 27% had been reunified between one and four years at the time of the interview. Three respondents had reunified with their children many years before, and were no longer living with them at the time of the interview as the children were grown. In addition, five women were reunified with children that they had given birth to in prison, and maintained custody of those children through their release into the community.

Over a third of the women in this study experienced termination of their parental rights for at least one of their children, which meant that their children could be adopted by others and that reunification became all but impossible. Of women who had their parental rights to at least one child terminated, the average<sup>1</sup> number of terminations is three. Some respondents indicated that the terminations had been initiated by New York City's child welfare system (the Administration for Children's Services [ACS]), though others volunteered that they had initiated the proceedings themselves.

Respondents in this study had extensive histories of criminal justice system involvement, having been arrested an average of five times (median) and incarcerated an average of three times (median). Respondents' longest

**TABLE 1** Demographic and Child Variables

Characteristic	
Age	Average: 40 (range: 20–68)
Race	
Non-Hispanic African American	71%
Non-Hispanic White	5%
Hispanic	21%
Other	3%
Living arrangements	
Homeless shelter	52%
Own rental housing	24%
Transitional housing	13%
Family/friends (homeless)	3%
Own permanent housing	3%
Other	2%
Education	
No high school diploma	65%
High school diploma	14%
At least some college	21% (1 woman doctoral degree)
Monthly income <sup>a</sup>	Median \$314 <sup>b</sup>
Children given birth to	Median = 3.0, mean = 3.4
At least one deceased child	14 (range: 1–6)
Respondents' oldest children <sup>c</sup>	Mean and median: 19 years old
Age at birth of first child	Mean: 21, median: 20.
Age at birth of most recent child	Mean and median: 29.
Age of youngest children	9

<sup>a</sup>Includes entitlements such as public assistance, food stamps, and social security (SSI).

<sup>b</sup>Includes the 23% of respondents who reported that they had no income at all.

<sup>c</sup>Data are missing for one respondent, whose only child was deceased at the time of the interview.

incarceration, on average, lasted a year and a half (median), and their release from their most recent incarceration was an average (median) of eight months before their interview in this study. The vast majority of respondents (92%) reported that they were engaging in fewer behaviors that could get them into trouble at the time of the interview than before their most recent incarceration and were therefore considered “desisting” for the purposes of this study. A small number of respondents reported that they were engaging in more behaviors at the time of the interview than they had before their most recent incarceration (5%) and a few (3%) reported engaging in the same number of behaviors at the time of the interview as before their most recent incarceration.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

The analysis resulted in two sets of findings about women’s desistance behavior. First, women’s reasons for desistance were less related to children than anticipated. Second, and more in line with the study’s expectations, respondents

reported that children acted both as prosocial bonds and as stressors, indicating that future research may uncover a complicated relationship with desistance.

**Why Desist?**

The broader findings about desistance stem from the 92% of respondents who were categorized as desisters, reporting fewer criminal behaviors at the time of the interview than before their most recent incarceration. Desisting women were asked about the reasons behind this change in behavior, and children were mentioned by the highest number of respondents. However, other reasons, such as incarceration and sobriety, were also mentioned by a large number of respondents and were far more likely to be mentioned first (see Table 2).

Incarceration (along with sobriety) was most likely to be mentioned first as a reason for desistance, and often without a probe. A large number of respondents spoke specifically about the time they spent incarcerated as something that they did not ever want to repeat, particularly because future returns might mean longer sentences:

Who wants to be in shackles, riding on these buses, all shackled, it's just terrible! It was an experience that I hope I never in my life have to go through again. In order for me not to go through that again, I shouldn't be putting myself in bad predicaments. (Sonia,<sup>2</sup> released 19 months before the interview)

**TABLE 2** Respondent Reasons for Desistance<sup>a</sup>

Reason for desistance	Mentioned? (%)	Mentioned first? (%)	If mentioned, was it after interviewer probe? (%)
Children	54	35	54
Incarceration	43	56	5
Substance abuse or sobriety	37	66	
Older/tired	16	40	
Wanting more for self and life	14	31	
Fear of death	12	18	
Faith	12	27	18
“Doing it for me”	9	33	
Romantic relationship (includes domestic violence)	3	33	
Mental health (emerging problems or resolved problems)	3	67	
Knowing self better	3	100	
Program	3	0	
Arrest	2	50	

<sup>a</sup>Five other reasons were mentioned, including consistency, “it feels good to desist”, focus, homelessness, and “one time thing”, each mentioned by one person.

For some of these women, the desire not to go back to incarceration was linked simply to the fact that their experiences in prison or jail were terrible. From specific experiences of missing services and health problems to a more general feeling of unease and fear, these respondents spoke with great distaste of their time spent incarcerated. A recent national report from the Vera Institute of Justice (Gibbons & Katzenbach, 2006) investigated safety and abuse in U.S. prisons. While the report did not separate out the experiences of incarcerated women, the authors did discuss their findings of prevalent violence and illness, substandard health care, high-security segregation policies that cause violence and contribute to recidivism, and difficult work conditions for correctional facility staff. Respondents' reflections on their time spent incarcerated often reflected the aversion one might expect to experiences in such a location. Respondents also talked about their aversion to the loss of freedom and control, negative experiences with correctional officers, and collateral consequences, such as restrictions of public assistance and loss of voting rights.

In fact, because of these negative experiences, many women spoke about the fact that they no longer viewed their drug or other illegal behavior as "worth it": They spoke of lost possibilities for themselves and about lost time with children or potentially damaged relationships with children. This negative view towards crime and incarceration was also related to other reasons for desistance, including the "sick and tired of being sick and tired" language often found in sobriety literature and fear of the death that many saw as the unavoidable consequence of their illegal behaviors.

Finally, many women gave more hopeful reasons for desistance, including an increased reliance on religious faith, and an increased focus on themselves, and on "doing good" in a way that felt better than the criminal behavior that characterized their lives before incarceration:

I wanna be a good member of society, I wanna be a woman and a mother that I know that I need to be, and I know that I could be. Without drugs. Without doing negative behaviors, and, you know, it's, it's time for me to change. (Chloe, released 9 months before the interview)

This leaves the question: If narratives so consistently focused on women's selves, to the exclusion of others, what is the role of motherhood in desistance?

### Do Children Discourage or Encourage Desistance . . . or Both?

As with all mothers, each respondent in the current investigation has unique relationships with her children. Nevertheless, a number of common threads emerged in the stories that the women told about the complicated nature of those attachments and about their desistance from criminal behavior.

The participants in this study spoke at length about their love for and pride in their children, focusing particularly on their accomplishments, from college education and jobs to marriages and grandchildren:

She's in school, she's doing good, she go to church, you know, she's a A [student], you know, she's a gifted child, you know, as I said, cause she's very smart . . . and I love her for that. (Kristina, released 10 months before interview)

Such positive perspectives were not limited to mothers who had reunified with their children. Women who had not yet reunified with their children, or who would not reunify with their children, spoke about their love for their children and their hopes for reunification or their despair at the termination of their parental rights:

I want to get [my son] back! I want to be with my kids, I love my kids. Even though I messed up, I'm still, I try to do my best for them, you know, cause I'm not messing up today. (Lynn, released 2 months before interview)

Respondents also described mutually loving relationships with their children, and described examples of children's expression of love:

[My daughter] was sleeping, and I walked in here, tapped her (taps table), she turned over and she looked, she jumped up out, out the bed, and she ran and jumped up in my arms, threw her legs around my legs, tight, it's like, Mommy! I was worried, I ain't hear from you, I miss you, I love you! (Chloe, released 9 months before interview)

In addition, a number of qualitative themes emerged to indicate that reunification, in fact, was often *avoided* because of respondents' placement of the children's needs over their own desire to reunify with the children. For some respondents, it was a more general concern for relationship stability, since many children had been with their caretakers for many years, and almost a third of respondents said that they thought their children might even be better off not living with them. Respondents sometimes thought that the relationship between the child and the caretaker was better than the relationship between the respondent and the child:

No, no. I just don't want to undo all the good my mother has done. Sometimes I sit in that shelter when all the other girls are sleeping, and cry, because I say to myself, would she have turned out to be such a good kid had I had her? (Inez, released 2 and a half years before interview)

The majority of these respondents, however, reasoned that their children should stay with others because of practical concerns, such as housing, schooling disruption, or respondent's substance abuse or HIV infection. This

often translated into a discussion of why it is important for the respondent to focus on her own needs before working towards reunification:

So, it would be best that I wait until I get my own apartment so that we can be together and there won't have to be any, you know, causing any kind of trauma . . . I wouldn't want to put that kind of pressure on my children. (Vanessa, released 3 months before interview)

Nonetheless, whether women had custody of their children or not, they had many perspectives on the relationship between their children and their desistance, both positive and negative.

When asked about the reasons behind their reported desistance, respondents most often suggested that their behavior changes had to do with their children. Love between respondents and their children was often linked to desistance: from children who were supportive as the woman struggled through reentry to children whose unconditional love (as it was often described) showed them to be a reliable and loving support system for women who had been rejected by others:

There were days that I wanted to kill myself. I tried to commit suicide three times. And, when I got out of it and realized what I did, the first thing I thought about was my children and how much I loved them (small break in voice), and what would happen to them if I died, or something happened to my mother or my sister or somebody. (Alessandra, released 5 months before interview)

The relationship between children (and reunification or lack thereof) and respondents' desistance (or lack thereof) was discussed at many different points during the interviews. Over a quarter of respondents said specifically that their children had some role in their desistance behaviors:

I just went from using drugs from a long time—18 years of my life. This 4 months since [my daughter] has been born has been the longest time I've had clean in 18 years on my own and I—she's the only reason. (Sabrina, released 4 months before interview)

Some of these respondents worried that going back to criminal behavior (and often, therefore, incarceration or death) would mean that the children would have no one to care for them, or that reunification would be impossible. For other respondents, simply having the child meant a sense of beauty, stability, structure, and busy-ness for the respondent that acted to prevent criminal or trouble behavior:

[Getting them back changed your life?]

Carmen (released 3 months before interview): Yes. If not I probably would be dead or sitting in jail right now.

[Why?]

Carmen: It gave me something to do.

Many respondents spoke specifically about the ways in which the time they spent incarcerated or otherwise away from their children (e.g., in the street or drugging) was something that they regret, and that time was often also described as one of the hardest parts of their incarceration. Now that they are back in the community, some of the women interviewed are interested in spending time with their children to make up for the lost time:

My older two of the kids, I was at her house Christmas, and she really gave it to me, but then she said “I forgive you mommy,” and you know, so that’s what I’m saying here recently, now this, the last [child], hasn’t gotten to that point yet. (Melissa, released 6 months before interview)

However, respondents did not speak of motherhood simply as encouraging desistance. The complications of parenthood experienced by most mothers and fathers, present in these interviews, also affected women’s desistance and relationships.

### Mothering in Reentry as a Stressor

Parenting has always been a difficult job, particularly for the poor and disenfranchised (Garbarino & Ganzel, 2000). As they spoke about their love for their children, the women of this study also spoke about the difficulties inherent in mothering their children, reunified or not. In particular, separation from children, almost by definition, requires a period of reacquaintance.

For most women who are released into the community after incarceration, there are many areas of their lives which need attention, from housing and a livelihood to family reunification and complying with parole mandates (Women’s Prison Association, 2003b). Respondents in this study voiced similar concerns, such as the well-documented challenges of having “a place” of their own:

It’s just me being in the shelters, making it kind of hard, you know, cause I don’t have nowhere else for them to go. (Lynn, released 2 months before interview)

Respondents also spoke of the difficulties of coping with domestic violence, maintaining sobriety and earning enough money to take care of many responsibilities in an expensive city like New York, common among reentering women (Women’s Prison Association, 2003b). They also talked about less investigated, but still serious practical problems such as reacclimating to a grand public transportation system after release from incarceration, and being

embarrassed by the emergence of one's criminal record in unexpected places, such as the DMV (Solinger, Johnson, Raimon, Reynolds, & Tapia, 2010).

## SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The findings from this study indicate that children are a very important part of women's desistance, regardless of custody status: first as a social bond that ties them to conforming, noncriminal behavior. Children are also a challenge to women's desistance because of the practical challenges associated with mothering, particularly mothering children with mental and physical health challenges, a finding consistent with both conceptual arguments (O'Brien, 2001) and recent research findings (M. Brown & Bloom, 2009). Reunification is therefore often difficult, and sometimes, in the opinion of the mothers, ill advised. However, the results of this study also show that no matter how important children may be to mothers and mothers to children, desistance from crime is also related to experiences that are strictly personal, such as incarceration, sobriety and concerns for mortality. This finding is consistent with Maruna's research with a mostly male sample (2001).

These attachment results are consistent with life course theory's traditional findings that such prosocial bonds can encourage desistance (Laub et al., 1998; Laub & Sampson, 2003; Sampson & Laub, 1990; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Sampson & Laub, 2003; Sampson, Laub, & Wimer, 2006). In addition, the present findings expand the theory to include the experiences of women and mothers, often overlooked in research.

Given the exploratory nature of this study, we must be cautious about generalizing the results to the general population of formerly incarcerated mothers. However, given the broad-based implications of attachment studies performed with men, the connections between women's attachments and their desistance are worth studying further. Specifically, future research should seek to deductively test hypotheses about women's desistance. Ideally, such research would be longitudinal in nature in order to assess the effects of attachments on desistance over time. The cost and time limitations of longitudinal research, however, indicate more short-term projects, such as a quantitative measure developed from the qualitative findings of studies such as this one. Cross-sectional, deductive assessment of the relationship between attachment and desistance may benefit from the use of validated and objective measures of both phenomena, such as those used by Giordano et al. (2002) for desistance and Abidin (1995) for attachment to children. In that children are not the only attachment present in the lives of reentering women, attachments to broadly-defined significant others would also be indicated, including extended family or intimate partners. Finally, any future qualitative studies on this topic should employ multiple data analysts so that interrater reliability may be established.

Another limitation of this study is that respondents were recruited using service provider connections, so that women receiving services are overrepresented. Future studies should attempt to engage women excluded by this methodology: reentering women who return home to sufficient resources or who have achieved sufficient resources upon reentry, and those who need services but refuse or are missed by them.

Given the exploratory nature of this study, the policy and practice implications must be limited. The policy and practice implications of a potential connection between attachment to children and desistance, however, would be broad: the expansion of use of community sanctions, the facilitation of contact between incarcerated mothers, and community support of family needs upon reentry, from housing and counseling to employment and health care. The implications of these shifted priorities would not only positively affect outcomes for mothers. A reduction in recidivism will have child-focused, public safety and cost saving implications in that there will be a reduction of reliance on foster care by mothers looking to reunify with their children. Approximately 11% of the 51,100 mothers in prison rely on foster care for at least one minor child (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008), meaning that such changes have the potential to affect many thousands of children. In addition, in that research into children's development and attachment has consistently supported the maintenance of ties between children and their incarcerated mothers (Adalist-Estrin, 1996), improved outcomes for children will mean increases in graduation rates and in high skill employment, as well as reductions in juvenile justice system populations. There are some social support agencies that support mothers in reentry and their children, and a connection between attachment to children and desistance would indicate that such programs should be evaluated for effectiveness and fully funded so that they can fulfill their goals.

Findings about non-child-related motivators may mean that future deductive research may also have a number of practical implications. For example, the importance of sobriety to desistance implicates the need for effective drug treatment, an idea with vast research support (see Huebner & Cobbina, 2007 for a review), if not the requisite adequate funding in the criminal justice system (Wilson, Wood, Hope, & Gehi, 2003). The connection between incarceration and desistance has more complicated implications: One might suggest that punitive sanctions are potentially effective as a deterrent; however, the reality of women's crime and desistance is that the majority of people with criminal justice system histories will be arrested again (Langan & Levin, 2002). Ideally, a system would combine the deterrent effect of an unpleasant criminal justice experience with the tools necessary for avoiding return.

Finally, the majority of the study participants in this project were unmarried African Americans or Hispanics, with a median income of less than \$400 per month, a hindrance to supporting only oneself, let alone a family with

children. In any study of the effects of the American criminal justice system, one must also consider the impact of larger structural issues, such as poverty, and the ways in which they may intersect with demographic characteristics such as gender and race. Any future research on women's desistance, including studies focused on attachment to children, should include an examination of the ways in which such social structures affect the likelihood of desistance or mediate the effectiveness of attachments.

As our nation realizes that incarceration is a costly and ineffective endeavor, we have the opportunity to implement policies that are effective for parents, children, and communities. This study indicates that practical support for mothers and children, and facilitation of strong relationships between those mothers and children, may indeed lead to safer communities.

## NOTES

1. Mean and median.
2. The names of all participants have been changed to ensure anonymity.

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