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Important Aspects to Women's Re-Integration: Positive Influences on Women's Reentry
Experience After Being Released from Prison

By

Sarah A. Benson

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

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In

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Important Aspects to Women's Re-Integration: Influences on Women's Reentry
Experience After Being Released from Prison

Sarah A. Benson

This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the student's
committee.

Advisor, Dr. Paul Prew

Committee Member, Dr. Christine Mollenkopf-Pigsley

Committee Member, Dr. Emily Stark

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IMPORTANT ASPECTS TO WOMEN'S RE-INTEGRATION: POSITIVE
INFLUENCES ON WOMEN'S REENTRY EXPERIENCE AFTER BEING
RELEASED FROM PRISON

SARAH A. BENSON

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
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ABSTRACT

Researchers can analyze statistics of recidivism rates and decipher that they are at an alarming rate—specifically regarding women convicts. The population of women in prison has drastically increased, and with that, so have their recidivism rates. Analyzing statistical data of incarceration and recidivism can show us the numbers, but what is the reason? Why do some women struggle to stay out of prison? I argued that one reason is because women who are released from prison are severely underprepared to reintegrate back into society and, are therefore, set up for failure. Previous studies suggest that reentry programs, education programs, relationships and support, and substance abuse/mental health treatment are vital to women's reintegration after their release from prison. Through in-depth interviews with two formerly incarcerated women, this study aimed to distinguish if those influences, or other influences, are significant to their reentry experience. Additionally, the women were asked what other women in prison can do when preparing to be released. I believe this firsthand advice will give proper insight to what women can do to better their chance at successful reentry back into mainstream society. It was found that all the influences distinguished and discussed in the literature are reflected in the participants' lived experiences with reentry. These findings reinforced the themes found in the literature review and suggested new insight on additional positive influences.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

When applying for a job, schooling, housing, etc., most people will not have to check the box on the application that asks if we have ever been convicted of a felony or been to prison—most people will not be dreading having to answer that, or the hardships that they face because they have to say yes, they are a convicted felon. Even after a person has been released from prison, their reintegration into society is no easy task. They will never be a “normal” citizen. They may finally be “free,” but what is it like transitioning from a prisoner to an ex-convict?

The main problem this study aims to address is the complications that women endure when re-integrating back into society after being released from prison. Some of these issues could include a difficult time finding employment, relationship problems, loss of custody to children, lack of resources, isolation, stigmatization leading to being shunned from society, amongst many others. The purpose of this study is to explore how women can better their reentry experience to help with these obstacles.

One reason reentry is worth studying, is to bring awareness to the hardships people who were previously incarcerated must face when they are released, and additionally, the unfair treatment they will encounter for the rest of their lives. Analyzing women’s re-entry would further highlight the difficult transition into mainstream society after prison. Though the road ahead is a difficult one, we can advocate for women faced with despair. Through education and advocacy, the two in synchronous harmony can alleviate feelings of anxiety and uncertainty upon their re-entry into society. Another reason reentry is worth studying is to educate the prisoners of these potential issues and

advise them to partake in the potential positive influences. Educating and bringing awareness can better prepare women for reintegration. Is there is anything a person can do while in prison, or once released, that will help their reentry experience? That is the question this study seeks to help answer.

In addition to the previous research, this study can aid prisons in developing programs that can assist inmates to prepare for their reintegration back into society. It can also help correction or parole officers gain a better understanding of what they can contribute to their jobs to make an inmate's release back into society the best experience—not only for the inmates, but for themselves. In addition to the previous research, this study will not only help prisons and prisoners better prepare for their release but can potentially help people who have struggled with their reintegration take the proper steps to try to mend their experience.

Each chapter will contribute to the overall objective of the study by doing the following: the literature review chapter will contribute by analyzing previous studies and research, to gain a better understanding of the topic and distinguish prior themes that have emerged. The methodology chapter will contribute by explaining how the data will be collected and why that method of data collection was chosen for this study. Additionally, the methodology chapter allows readers to get a better understanding of what the study will entail. The findings chapter contributes by laying out the data that has been collected. Following the findings chapter, the discussion and conclusion chapter will tie everything together and discuss if the study correlates to previous research and points to opportunities for future research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The number of women in prison went up 203% between the years of 1995 and 2008 —most of whom will encounter issues to effective reintegration (Valera, Chang, and Hernandez 2015). Some of these social and economic challenges include difficulties being employed, being disqualified from living at certain properties, barricades to working in certain career fields, and denial of opportunities (Tietjen, Burnett, and Jessie 2020). Seigafo (2017) argues that the rise in the United States’ prison population is due to America’s failed attempt to adequately “correct” the prisoners. Lack of rehabilitation resources could be to blame for the excessive recidivism rates in the United States. What “rehabilitation resources” will actually provide positive post-release outcomes? While no reintegration is going to be easy, there are ways to help with the experience. Amongst the literature reviewed in this study, four common themes have emerged that have a positive effect for women reentering society. These themes are 1.) re-entry programs, 2.) relationships and support, 3.) self-perception 4.) mental health and substance abuse services.

Re-entry Programs

The first, and most common, theme throughout the literature is various re-entry programs. Formulating reentry programs nationwide has helped inmates with support, education, and other needs for their reintegration back into society (Cannonier, Burke, and Mitchell 2021). One example of a reentry program is “A New Way of Life Reentry Project,” a nonprofit organization that offers housing and support to women being re-integrated back into society after prison (Burch 2016). Burch (2016) argues that a critical,

holistic approach has significant positive effects for women returning home from prison. Her major findings consist of six key elements to A New Way of Life's approach: recognizing preexisting vulnerabilities, building community, supporting individual agency, resisting cooptation, providing comprehensive services, and confronting unequal structures. She concludes that a critical, comprehensive approach can have a significant positive effect for people reintegrating back into society after prison.

McLemore and Hand (2016) studied a vastly different reentry program. They analyze innovative reentry programs that focus on women of color, policy recommendations that are needed to support the sustainability of such programs, and the success of the women who participate in them. They look at research studies in which low-income, formerly incarcerated women were trained to become birth doulas. Their major findings suggest that training these women to become birth doulas is an effective strategy to help them with employment barriers after being released from prison.

The advocacy program, ReConnect, is a twelve-session advocacy and leadership development program (Pinto, Rahman, and Williams 2014). The authors found that participants who went through this program were empowered by all of the information they learned including parental rights, housing, and employment. These participants claimed that going through the program improved their communication skills—which led to positive impacts on their reintegration experience (Pinto et al. 2014). They state that “reentry programs ought to enhance formerly incarcerated women’s capacity to engage in advocacy efforts and that their life experiences can be powerful, inspirational, tools to

help create social and political changes to address the needs to those directly impacted by incarceration and the criminal system” (Pinto et al. 2014:71).

Additionally, Severson et al.’s (2012) study also concludes that women who took part in the reentry program that they examined were less likely to be rearrested. Severson et al. (2012) continue to analyze a reentry program that was originally funded by the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI) and has since remained funded by private foundations. Their findings indicate that women who fully complete the program have significantly better outcomes than the women who only partially complete the program. They mention that it is important to consider that not one reentry program will cater to the entire prison population.

Education Programs

A commonality within the literature, regarding reentry programs, is that providing inmates with education opportunities leads to better reintegration outcomes. For this section, “education” entails school-based education, i.e., the women gaining high school level, or college level classes to go towards a degree. Bozick et al. (2018) address the question of whether providing inmates with education while they are in prison decrease their chances of recidivism and improve their reentry employment opportunities. They found that inmates who did participate in education programs were almost thirty percent *less* likely to reoffend compared to inmates who did not participate. Despite these findings, they found that participants in educational programs were just as likely as people who did not participate in educational programs to get employment after being released from prison (Bozick et al. 2018). Their meta-analysis displays “the value in

providing inmates with educational opportunities while they serve their sentences if the goal of the program is to reduce recidivism” (Bozick et al. 2018:389).

Pelletier and Evans (2019) also examine the outcomes of people who participated in education while in prison. They interviewed people who completed college-level course work, some of whom obtained a degree, or multiple degrees. The participants attributed various positive outcomes to partaking in the educational programs. The direct benefits of higher education, that they discovered, were the development of personal attributes/skills, confidence, leadership, positive self-image, social networks, and prosocial bonds to social institutions. These benefits lead to a better reintegration experience. Contrary to Bozick et al.’s (2018) study, Pelletier and Evans’ (2019) study did conclude that participating in higher education while in prison leads to a better chance at opportunity for employment.

Gender Specific Programs

The Advocate Program has provided multiple services to help women reintegrating back into society (Wesley and Dewey 2018). They interviewed women who had been in prison to get their opinions on gender-sensitive reentry programs and how they affected their reintegration experience. Wesley and Dewey’s (2018) findings suggest that the women participating in the Advocate Program had many of their gendered needs catered to—the program provided multiple services, such as helping with housing, getting jobs, transportation services, receiving medical attention, schooling, therapy, etc. The women who participated in these interviews provided immense positive evaluations of the Advocate Program.

Herrschaft, et al. (2009) address the issue of how reentry programs are predominately made for men and how that fails to accommodate for strategies specifically for women. They state that women's prisons lack reentry resources, and how some women offender's reentry problems, i.e., influences of addiction, toxic relationships, or both, fail to be noticed by society. Helfgott and Gunnison (2020) advocate for the need for gender specific reentry programs as well. They raise the struggle of women enduring low self-esteem, coping mechanisms (specifically with sexual abuse trauma), regaining custody of their kids, and seeking treatment for substance abuse or mental health disorders. Their study found that the more prerelease program classes (P.R.E.P) the women have completed, the less likely they were to recidivate, and the women reported an increased sense of calmness after taking part in the P.R.E.P. Overall, the women who participated in the P.R.E.P had reported more personal growth than prior to the program. Both Herrschaft et al. (2009) and Helfgott and Gunnison's (2020) studies found relationships and support are core influences on women's reintegration experience—which brings us into the next theme of relationships/support.

Relationships and Support

It is not surprising that social support and social networks are an essential influence on women with a criminal history (Valera et al. 2015). Valera et al.'s (2015) study examines kinship and social support between women who had recently been released from prison. They provide an extensive awareness of the kin organizations and responsibilities women who were previously in prison are likely to encounter during community reintegration. Their findings propose that identifying relationships for

formerly incarcerated women are important aspects to being re-integrated back into society. The relationships they discussed, and found to be beneficial for reintegration, are relationships with biological families/stepfamilies, children, grandchildren, romantic partners and their family, peers/friends/acquaintances, and God. Their findings suggest that “identifying kin relationships for formerly incarcerated women are important ingredients to community reintegration” (Valera et al. 2015:290). Grieb et al. (2014), conversely, went to the ex-convict’s support systems to conduct their study; they held focus groups for family members of people who were reintegrating back into society. Despite these family members undergoing an immense amount of stress to be a source of support, Grieb et al. (2014) found that most people felt an obligation to be supportive because their loved one would have no other option. Regardless of the motives, the family members, for their own reasons, knew how essential their support was.

A different type of relationship, *mentorship*, presented itself in two studies. Brown and Ross (2010) analyze the effects that mentorship can have on women’s reentry by looking at The Women’s Mentoring Program. They propose that mentoring offenders can help with a decrease of recidivism and better rehabilitation. They say that due to the intensity of the relationship, mentorships can be an effective source of support (similar to family or close friends). They found the mentoring program to have a key role in providing companionship and emotional support to the women—which positively influences their reintegration. Additionally, through an autoethnographic approach, Tietjen, Burnett, and Jessie (2020) discuss the importance of mentorship by faculty members to their students who have been previously incarcerated. They describe how this

mentorship guided the formerly incarcerated students to activism and advocacy—which led to positive outcomes. They examine the disadvantages associated with the stigmatization of having an ex-convict status and how it affects the mentorship process. They claim that this mentorship “is vital to improving the life chances of those who have experienced prison...” (Tietjen et al. 2020:645). Tietjen et al.’s (2020) findings on activism and advocacy leads us into the next theme, identity development.

Self-Perceptions

For this study, “self-perception” constitutes self-worth/self-esteem, advocacy/empowerment, and optimism. Hunter and Greer (2011) address the issue of how women who have been in prison often have a challenging time with their identities and describing who they are. The authors focus on identity theories and how past trauma affects women’s perceptions of themselves. Their major findings conclude that most women’s accounts determine that they were working toward evolving a clearer, increased sense of self.

As previously mentioned, the program that Pinto et al. (2014) studied, focused on advocacy and leadership. The ReConnect program derives from an integrated framework of empowerment and transformational leadership theories. They mention the hardships that women will encounter immediately after being released from prison and how it is a highly vulnerable time for them. If they are not properly educated and prepared to reintegrate back into society, they are at an increased risk to reoffend and be put back in prison (Pinto et al. 2014). Programs like ReConnect “provide re-entry services and initiatives to help formerly incarcerated women strengthen their self-efficiency and self-

reliance skills...” (Pinto et al. 2014:72). They suggest that going through these programs to help with advocacy and empowerment can help women directly confront and overcome the stigma/discrimination that they endure. Their findings indicate that women engaging in advocacy and leadership efforts help women address their interrelated personal issues which will aid them in reintegrating back into society.

Allen’s (2018) study integrates ideas from Hunter and Greer (2011) and Pinto et al.’s (2014) studies by analyzing both identity and the stigmatization of being labelled as an offender. Her study introduces how women who self-identify as a continuous offender/career criminal, in addition to marginalization, influences their success after being released from prison. Her study aimed to construct a comprehensive guide that fuses micro and macro aspects to enlighten the difficulties of women who are re-integrated into society after imprisonment. Her major finding was that marginalized statuses (race/poverty/education) affected the results. Her study concludes a correlation between ethnicity/poverty with the age of their first run in with the law. The women who did identify as a career criminal were less capable to see their future positively and felt like they have less support of their loved ones while they were in jail. The participants who labeled themselves as a “persistent offender” showed lower esteem including hope, empowerment, and self-efficiency. Her study establishes that self-identity is correlated with optimism, and identification as a persistent offender led to increased arrests. She found that participants with higher hope, empowerment, and self-efficacy were not as likely to label themselves as persistent offenders, and they revealed more effort in abiding to the laws once they were released.

As previously discussed, Helfgott and Gunnison's (2020) study mention that women who had problems with self-esteem, that participated in the P.R.E.P., reported higher self-esteem and felt that they now had a voice. These women had better confidence and responsibility. Overall, they were more stable after participating in the program. Cobbina and Bender (2012) look at optimism in women offenders and argue that optimism influences desistance. They, like many of the other studies, reinforce that women are subject to unique issues when being released from prison, i.e., regaining custody of their children. They found that women with more positive outlooks were often motivated by their children. Additionally, women who were more optimistic had less of a chance of reoffending. On the contrary, pessimistic women tended to bring up substance abuse issues and voiced that they did not believe they would be able to stay clean once released, so they would most likely end up back in prison. This puts forward the last theme, mental health, and substance abuse services.

Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services

Two of the most prevalent problems that women, who are being released from prison, face are mental health disorders and substance abuse—which go hand-in-hand. Most women in prison who have substance abuse problems also have mental health problems (Johnson et al. 2014). Once released from prison, the individuals' main concern is typically housing and employment, which means that their mental health needs are not prioritized. Only a third of prisoners with mental health issues will receive adequate mental health services (Backer, Howard, and Moran 2007). Once released back into society, these individuals' risk higher chances of death by suicide, homicide, or drug

overdose (Angell et al. 2014). Angell et al.'s (2014) study examines two mental health treatment centers for people reintegrating back into society. They found that providing these mental health services for people being released from prison is crucial for their reintegration back into society. They mention that prisoners with psychiatric disorders are often released without enough medication, so allowing them access to these mental health services is pivotal for them to have positive outcomes. Bedell et al. (2015) also mention how untreated health problems (including mental health) impact over 80% of people being released from prison—which can lead to further drug use. Johnson et al.'s (2014) study implicates that more mental health services and substance abuse services are needed for women being released from prison.

Homelessness Prevention

Both Backer et al. (2007) and Lutze, Rosky, and Hamilton (2014) study homelessness and reentry, which is indeed impacted by mental health issues and substance abuse. Lutze et al. (2014) mention that having a history of mental health issues and/or substance abuse will generate additional hardships for people being released from prison to gain employment or financial resources. Both studies found that effective discharge planning (providing mental health/substance abuse services) will reduce recidivism and lead to more positive reintegration outcomes.

The literature that has been reviewed in this section helps to address the research question of this study; what can positively influence women's reintegration back into society after being released from prison? Thus far, deriving from the literature, there are patterns of positive influences for women's reintegration back into mainstream society.

These positive influences include participation in reentry/education programs, having healthy relationships/a stable support system, working to better one's self-perception, and getting appropriate mental health and/or substance abuse treatment.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Because the needed data must be rich, informative, and experienced, the best choice of methodology for this study is qualitative, primary data. There was a possibility that the participants would have different effects from the influences that are unique to their individual experience, i.e., what might have influenced one participant positively, might have influenced another participant negatively (or not at all), so, the effects cannot be assumed to be universal—all participants needed to be individually heard, and from there it was distinguished if there were collective themes regarding the research study.

The technique of data collection used was semi-structured, in-depth, one-on-one interviewing. In-depth interviews allow the best opportunity for the participants to discuss as much detail about their experiences as they choose. Interviewing these women gave them the chance to express themselves as much, or as little, as they were comfortable. They were able to open-endedly talk about the interview questions and mention any further information that they felt was relevant to the study. This research project used qualitative because these semi-structured, in-depth interviews were essential to receive the most beneficial information. The answers sought from the interview questions are open-ended and each participant's responses had the potential to lead to various follow up questions. These answers could not be as easily asked through surveys. Asking these questions through a survey would not be interactive and would not allow for as much detail. Semi-structured interviews allow for more flexibility with the questions and responses. In-depth interviews are the best methodology option to ensure that I am getting the most advantageous data for this particular study. Additionally, to compensate

for the women's time and effort in the study, personal funding was used to give each participant a forty-dollar gift card.

Sample

Through convenience sampling, the women who chose to take part in this study were interviewed about their personal experience when they reintegrated back into society after being released from prison. The convenience sampling entailed the following recruitment: multiple parole officers, located in Southwest Minnesota and Northwest Iowa, were contacted to ask if they would be willing to distribute the recruitment flyers to their current or former parolees. From there, brief information about the study was discussed and questions they had were answered about the study or what they needed to do. The only job the parole officers had was to distribute the flyers. If, at the point the women received the flyers were interested in participating in the study, or wanted more information, the researcher's (my) contact information was on the recruitment flyer (see appendix C). Once the researcher was contacted, further information about the study, and what their interview would entail, was discussed.

There were two participants in this study. Both were Caucasian women who were in the age range of 30-50. They had both been incarcerated at state prisons. One of the participants has been out of prison for a few years, and the other participant has been out of prison for less than a year. The only qualifications that the participants had to meet were that they are a woman who had been previously incarcerated, and that they were over age of eighteen. Due to the limitations of the study, which are discussed in the "Discussion and Conclusion" chapter, requiring any more qualifications of participants

would have been highly inconvenient and could have further restricted the number of participants that took place in the study. Once the participant agreed to take part in the study, she first needed to read and sign the informed consent form (see appendix A). If she had any questions about the informed consent form, they were discussed and answered to the researcher's best ability. Once the consent form was read and signed, the participant was again notified that at any point she can step out of the study if she no longer wants to take part in it. From there, an interview was scheduled at the participant's convenience, i.e., they chose the time/date/location of the interview. Interviews were expected to take between 45-60 minutes long.

Interview Procedure

As mentioned previously, the participant was able to choose the time, date, and location of the interview. The interview was suggested to take place in a public location that had a secluded area where we would be able to converse in private without being overheard, to ensure privacy of the conversation. At the time of the interview, I took their signed informed consent form. This is also when they were given their gift card. Prior to the interview starting, the participant was told that the interview is going to be audio-recorded on the researcher's password protected cellphone, and then after the interview, sent to the researcher's password protected computer to transcribe. They were notified that only the researcher will have access to the audio recordings, and that after the audio recording is transcribed, the audio recordings will be permanently deleted. After discussing any additional questions that they had, the interview began.

The interview guide consisted of eleven questions regarding potential influences of reintegration (see appendix B). The first set of questions addressed re-entry programs. They were asked what programs, if any, were offered in the prison where they were incarcerated. If the women participated in any programs offered, their involvement in those programs was discussed, and whether participation in the program(s) shaped their reentry. The second set of questions was about the overall preparation of the prison for their release, i.e., what the prison did (or did not do) to prepare them for release, and if they wished the prison would have done anything differently. The next set of questions was about their relationships/support system and what those relationships were like for them before, during, and after prison. These relationships could include, parents, spouses/partners, children, siblings, other family members, friends, neighbors, mentors, religious figures, etc. The next set of questions was about their sense of self before, during, and after prison. "Sense of self" consisted of their identity, self-worth, self-esteem, and mental health. Finally, the women are asked about any advice they had for other women preparing to be released from prison, and lastly if there was anything else they would like to discuss.

Analytic Strategy

After each interview was completed, the audio-recording on the researcher's cellphone was sent to the researcher's password protected laptop to transcribe. The transcriptions were used to further analyze the interviews. From the transcriptions, codes and memos were developed to analyze themes and patterns in the data. Coding and memoing the transcriptions aided in further analysis of the interviews to determine and

classify how relevant the data is to the research question. Once both interviews had taken place, the memos were collectively re-evaluated to compare any similarities and discrepancies between the women's reentry experiences. This led to the development of the findings and conclusion chapters.

Potential Risks

Given the nature of the study, sensitive topics, i.e., mental health, drug use, their time in prison, etc., were talked about with the participants and there was a chance doing so could cause them emotional discomfort. The participants were told before the interview began, in addition to information they read in the informed consent form, that, in the event they become uncomfortable, they can stop the interview. Additionally, the participants were told they did not have to answer any questions they did not want to answer. The comfort and privacy of the participants was the researcher's main priority. There were no foreseeable physical risks for this study.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The qualitative, in-depth interviews of this study strove to investigate influences on women's reintegration after being released from prison and analyzed the complications that the participants endured when returning back into society. The women were asked about their personal experience with the hardships that come when being released underprepared and what they did, or what someone could do, to help lessen the hardships. The research project attempted to identify if themes found in the literature review were reflected in these women's lived experiences. These themes, again, are as follows: 1.) Women who partake in re-entry programs will have better reintegration success because they are more prepared to reenter society. 2.) Women who gain some sort of education, i.e., obtain their G.E.D or a college degree, will have better success because they may have better employment opportunities. 3.) Women who have a healthy support system will have better success. 4.) Women who have optimistic perceptions of themselves will have better success. And lastly, 5.) Women who get adequate mental health and substance abuse services will have better success and are less likely to relapse. "Better reintegration success" is defined as the women are less likely to recidivate and go back to prison, and they are more likely to have better outcomes, i.e., stable relationships, gaining employment, staying sober, living a healthier lifestyle.

Given that there are only two participants whom the data educes from, this thesis took the opportunity to dive deep into their individual experiences to thoroughly inspect and discuss how their reentry back into society both individually, and collectively, correspond to the research problem, and whether or not the themes from the literature

review are efficacious. In this chapter, there are four sections that stem from the literature review: re-entry/education programs, relationships and support, self-perceptions, and mental health/substance abuse services. Additionally, there will be a section on their preparation for release, i.e., whether they were prepared to be released and what the prison did (or did not do) to prepare them for release. The last section will be on their advice to other women who are reintegrating back into society. Amongst each of the sections, both women's personal experience are discussed regarding that topic. Extensive quoting of the women will be utilized to ensure accurate inferences of the results in the next chapter. The women's names have been given pseudonyms.

Re-entry and Education Programs

Neither of the women participated in programs that were specially catered to reintegration, because neither of them was offered reentry programs at the prison where they were formally incarcerated. Sasha mentioned a single class that some women were eligible to take when they were up for release, however she did not participate in that class and that class was not something she considered to be a re-entry program. She expressed that she wished they would have offered a variety of reentry programs. Carla was also not offered any sort of reentry program or class. Meanwhile, both women obtained some sort of school-based education while they were incarcerated, which they both found beneficial to their reentry. Carla was paid to obtain her GED throughout her sentence, which she found to aid in gaining employment after being released. Similarly, Sasha completed her HiSET, and afterwards was allowed to take a life skills class and a computer class that she found to be valuable.

Relationships and Support

When asked about what their relationships were like before, during, and after prison, and how their support system, or lack thereof, impacted their reentry, Carla said:

I have seven children. None of them talk to me, before prison or after prison. No family. I had nothing—nobody. When I got out, and I proved myself, my kids started talking to me again, but there was a lot of hard questions I didn't want to answer. But I did; like why would you choose drugs and alcohol and men over us? I lost my parental rights over them because of this, but when they all turned 18, I had to answer a lot of hard questions. Still today. Three of them don't talk to me, and four of them do. Then the rest of my family, I don't talk to none of them because, like, I must be the black sheep of the family. You know, I don't hide what I do so I don't talk to them because they think they're better than me and I just don't have nothing to say to them.

Additionally, her mother and father had both passed away and her siblings are drug addicts who do not live near her. Carla stated that her main support system is her fiancé and his family, however, before meeting him she had no one. At the time of her release, she did not have a support system. She said that “Having people that care about you and tell you you're doing good; it helps a lot. I relapsed three times before I had any support. Family support helps a lot. Otherwise, it's like you just don't care.” She further discussed the influence that a support system has on reintegration:

When you don't have nobody, you just don't care. That's why so many people return to prison. I've been there three times. You know, it's like people just don't care. Because they have nothing out here to look forward to. Girls go in there and they lose their kids, so they just keep doing what they do. I know a girl that has been back there seven times because she has nobody. That's the life she knows. That's her family—the women in prison.

Prior to going to prison, Sasha was in and out of abusive relationships that involved a lot of drugs and criminal activity. She was also surrounded by friends who negatively influenced her. Since going to prison she has chosen to cut off those people. Given that she is from a small community, she was nervous about running into some of these people after she was released. She has lost all of her friends from before prison, except her current partner whom she said is “the only one that stood by me before, during, and after,” and that he is very supportive of her. She talked about how her relationship with her mother has changed as well; “We have always been close, but with the things that I was doing, we fought and argued a lot, and it stressed her out. Now we don't fight or argue really at all.” Unfortunately, similar to Carla’s situation with her children, Sasha’s lack of relationship with her children has caused her heartache, however, since being in prison, she has established a better relationship with them. She said:

I didn't have much of a relationship with my kids. My baby dad took them from me when my oldest, now 10, was 2. I have three kids and he has had all three of

them since then. My youngest is now 8. I didn't have a bond like we should have. Now, I talk to my kids every day, all the time. We have a bond, it's not what I want it to be, but it's still a bond.

While she was incarcerated, she started talking to her children more regularly, and that led to their relationships being strengthened. She said that having a better relationship with her children was a “definite plus side” when she was released. Both women agreed that having a stable support system was essential when reintegrating back into society. Since being released from prison, both women also started attending church, which they think is another reliable source of support. Sasha said:

Go to church—literally, go to church. Down here, church is a big thing, especially where I work. We have big church groups that come into work, and the pastors, they're very supportive. If you don't have a support system when you get released, try to associate yourself with like a church community cause they'll help you.

Carla had similar views of attending church and said “A lot of people don't get into church, but I would say go to church. Everybody at my church is amazing. If you don't have family. That's been the most amazing thing ever to me. It's great.”

Self-Perceptions

When asking these women about their perceptions of themselves over the course of their time in prison and post-release, they both expressed that they had significantly

changed their mindsets about their selves since being incarcerated. Their lives and lifestyles had changed for the better. Carla explained:

I really, I stole a lot, I lied a lot, I cheated a lot. I sold myself for drugs. I would do just about anything. I hung out with all guys. And, if one of them wanted me to go hit a lick with them, I was there. I was on it. I would just about do anything illegal that sounded fun. I was just one of those girls. Do you want to do it? Let's go. And now? I wouldn't even think twice about doing some stupid shit like that. I respect myself now. I don't talk to many men anymore. I have female relationships now. I don't think all women are bitches like I used to. A lot of it was the drugs...I think being in recovery, and *truly* being in recovery, like, doing it for yourself is a big motivator and helps you with your self-respect. It comes along with it. You learn that. You know, just staying sober and not being around old people, places, and things. It also helps.

Likewise, Sasha discussed:

Before I went to prison, I was horrible. Horrible. I had low self-esteem. I didn't care about nothing. Like I don't care, it's my life. I'm going to do it if I want to. So then when I went to prison, it made me focus on me, because I like to focus on other people. I would put other people before myself. And then being in prison I had to learn that is not something you want to do. You always want to put yourself first. And now, I mean, I still kind of put other things first, like my job. I'm a workaholic, and if it was before prison, I would have been like yeah, I don't

like it. I didn't have a job for over 6 years because I didn't want one, and that's not a good thing. So how I looked at myself was like, oh, I'm going to sleep all day. I don't want a job. I'm not going to do nothing. I'm just going to be lazy. I'm gonna sell drugs I'm gonna, you know... When I went to prison, I was so unhealthy, so unhealthy and that I thought that that was normal. And then I went to prison and in prison I gained some weight, and I looked a healthy. I started liking myself for who I am like. I didn't before. I didn't like myself at all. I hated myself. I hated the world. It sucked. I'm comfortable with myself now.

She then went on to give her insights on how she got to the point of having a more positive mindset;

In order to change something, you literally have to change it yourself, you know? I came out and I'm doing really good. I have a job. I work seven days a week. I don't get in trouble, and I'm sober. I have a great life. I love my life right now. It's crazy. I love it... Change doesn't just happen. You have to want it to happen. You have to want it. Like you know, nobody can want it for you. Basically, I mean, that's just like going to treatment. You go to treatment. Treatment doesn't help you unless you want it to help. I sat in prison 14 months and thought about my whole entire life. Everything I lost... Don't do it for other people. Do it for yourself. Don't talk about it, be about it. Do about it.

Both women strongly advocated for needing to want to change for yourself and taking action to implement those desired changes.

Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services

As stated in the literature review chapter, two of the most critical problems that women face when being released from prison are mental health conditions and substance abuse, both of which, each of these women have struggled with or are currently struggling with. Carla and Sasha suffer with anxiety and depression, and the only sort of treatment they received while being in prison was medication. Sasha additionally suffers from bipolar and paranoia personality disorder, and she believed that being put on medication helped regulate her symptoms. Carla, meanwhile,, did not agree with being medicated, and stopped taking her medication when she was released. When asked about the prison offering any sort of counseling, therapy, or psychological treatment to help, both reinforced that none of that was available. Both also said that at the time of their release, no mental health resources were provided or suggested to them.

Prior to being incarcerated, Carla and Sasha both used illegal, recreational drugs. When Carla got to prison, she took part in a Residential Drug Awareness Program (RDAP). She believed the RDAP to be helpful and that it was an incredibly good program. However, two days after being released from prison, she relapsed. After turning herself in, she was sent to a Residential Treatment Facility (RTF) instead of being sent back to prison and she stated, "I think it was the best thing for me because I feel like violations regress people because they don't do nothing for you in there." Carla thinks that the RTF works so well for her because of the structure and compliance the facility

has. There are a lot of rules the women who are at the RTF have to abide by. Carla believed that if she would have been sent back to prison instead of the RTF, she would have started using again. She attributed a lot of her successful reintegration to there, saying:

The structure and the rules. They suck, but you follow them, and you do what you need to do. You're going to end up like me. I have a great job. I go to meetings. I go to church. I have self-respect, and a lot of it is because of that place. If you go there and you follow the rules and you do what you're supposed to do, you're going to get a lot out of it and you're going to feel good about yourself.

Meanwhile, at the prison where Sasha was formerly incarcerated at, there were no treatment programs offered. She wished she would have been able to start an A.A. or N.A. group while she was in prison. She sought out treatment on her own, but nothing was suggested or provided to her.

Preparation for Release

Neither woman said they were prepared to be released. At the time of her release, Sasha was nervous and scared because she did not know how she would handle certain situations, such as seeing her old friends that she no longer associated with. Carla was not ready to reintegrate back into society at all. She explained:

I got high two days after I got out. Just because, I mean, I don't know, I was just in there and out of there. I was on a 5-year sentence... I did four months from jail to getting out of prison. I was not emotionally, mentally, or anything ready.

Obviously not...recovery ready and they don't care about that either. I mean you're in there on a drug charge and they don't, you know, they don't help you with that.

The follow up question they were asked after answering if they felt prepared, was what the prison, that they were formerly incarcerated at, did to help them prepare to be released. They both were very quick to answer “nothing.” Carla said “They just tell you you're getting paroled early. And that's it. So, when you violate and they send you back, it's just stupid because they're setting you up for more failure... Like you're in there and they kick you out because they have to have so many people in and out to get funded. They don't care.” Sasha shared similar opinions, she said “Nothing. Absolutely nothing. You know the counselors and stuff; they don't help you set up nothing. You have to do it all on your own. They release you from prison and it's like they wash their hands of you.” Both wished that the prisons would have offered more classes and programs to help with sobriety and reentry preparation.

Advice for Women Preparing to be Released

One of the last questions the women were asked is what advice they would give to women who are preparing to be released from prison. Carla and Sasha gave insightful counseling and words of encouragement. Carla's advice was on post-release housing, she advised:

I would not recommend going, releasing to a halfway house. Because it is not really structured. I know everybody says RTF sucks, but it's been amazing for me. Halfway houses are just too much freedom and everybody that's in my aftercare. I

know girls that are in a halfway house and they're all using because they just have too much freedom. They keep drinking. They keep relapsing. And I mean you can do it anywhere, but I would just recommend if you're not real stable in a recovery program, not to go to a halfway house or even home for that matter, unless you know that you really want this. I mean you have to wholeheartedly want this because it's not easy. If you have a support, and if you go home with the support system, yeah, that's a different story, but it is a whole different story if you have nobody.

Sasha gave a little bit different advice, suggesting:

I would say honestly, do as much research as possible—into the reentry programs and into treatments. Communicate. You know, like, what's your family on the outside, what's your support system on the outside and have them help you find reentry programs and stuff. Don't just rely on the prison. And to never forget that they're never alone, ever. And they have online resources. They have groups and stuff like on Facebook for support systems, if they need them... You have to learn how to control yourself. When you go to re-enter into society, If you don't know how to handle or control things that are the issue of the why you went to prison, then it's going to be hard to re-enter into society, especially being around people because when you get out of prison and you're on be on parole. And when you're on parole, you have rules and regulations.

Stemming from the accounts of the two participants, the key findings of the interviews are 1.) participating in educational opportunities can help with finding employment after being released 2.) in the opinion of the women, the prisons lacked providing reentry programs and other preparatory actions for the prisoners, 3.) relationships and support were major influences on their reentry, 4.) improved self-worth and self-esteem led to motivation for a better life, which was important to their sobriety and recovery, 5.) mental health services were not provided to these women while in prison, nor were mental health services suggested or advised to the women upon release, and 6.) both Carla and Sasha advocated for seeking substance abuse treatment, and that doing so can substantially help with reentry back into society.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Carla and Sasha's experiences can help answer the research question of what can positively influence women's reintegration when they are released from prison. Their experiences also help reinforce some of the themes from the literature and have established more themes. In the literature review chapter, four positive influences were distinguished: participating in reentry programs/education programs, having a stable support system, being optimistic along with positive self-esteem, and receiving proper treatment for mental health issues and/or substance abuse. All four were reflected in the participants' experiences with their own reintegration back into society. Neither woman was offered reentry programs but wish they would have been, which corresponds to Herrschaft et al. (2009) conclusion that women's prisons lack reentry programs. However, they did both complete some sort of education which they found to help them get their jobs when they were released. This reinforces Pelletier and Evans' (2019) findings that participating in education programs while in prison can lead to a better chance at employment opportunity once released.

Correlating to Valera et al. (2015) key finding that relationships are important to reentry, both women believed that having strong support and healthy relationships were vital to have—especially when being released from prison, Carla did not have a support system when she was released, and it only took her two days out of prison to relapse. Once she found a support system, things got significantly better for her. Sasha had the support of her children, her children's father, her mother, and some other family members. She believed having this support helped her immensely.

They both struggled with their self-worth, self-esteem, and self-image prior to going to prison. Sasha claimed it took going to prison, and having her whole sentence to reevaluate her life, is what led her to change her mindset and mentality. Carla had a more downhill battle with herself before things got better after being released. She relapsed multiple times before getting sent to treatment, and being there is when she decided to change and have a more positive outlook on herself and her life. Both women have significantly transformed their mentality and mindset—which has positively influenced their lives. This is consistent with Allen’s (2018) findings on positive attitudes of women who have been released from prison and Cobbina and Bender’s (2012) findings on optimism and pessimism of women who have been released from prison. Positive mindsets and optimistic attitudes are likely to positively influence women with reentry and make them less likely to reoffend.

As mentioned in the findings chapter, Sasha and Carla struggled with mental health issues *and* substance abuse. Neither of which received adequate treatment for their mental health while incarcerated. This was not surprising as Johnson et al. (2014) found that there is a lack of these services and that more mental health and substance abuse services need to be provided. Carla and Sasha were only medicated - no counseling, no therapy, no psychological help. While one thought the medication was helpful to her, the other did not. At the time of their release, no sort of treatment had been suggested and no referrals to treatment were made. Carla did receive treatment for drug use when she first got to prison, however, that was not useful for her when she was released. Again, at the time of their release, no sort of substance abuse treatment or help was suggested or

referred by anyone at the prison. Both women ended up going to treatment, however, it was at their own discretion. They both expressed a concern for the prisons not offering any sort of help, especially when preparing for release.

One of the themes that was prevalent throughout both interviews, which I did not specifically interpret in the literature, is that change is a key component to reintegration, and it is important for someone to want this change for themselves. This correlates to self-perception, however, I felt it to be important enough to discuss on its own because even though they go hand-in-hand, the women need to change more than just their self-esteem, self-worth, etc., to not only successfully reenter society, but to prevent themselves from going back to prison. Environmental changes also need to be implemented in addition to the psychological changes. Even if a woman comes out of prison more optimistic, with better self-esteem, that is not going to ensure that her old habits, i.e., drug use, are going to disappear. The change Carla and Sasha talk about is mental, emotional, psychological, and physical, and environmental. They had to change their whole lives to get on the right track—and with that came their positive self-esteem and optimism. For example, Sasha had to disassociate from previous acquaintances who were bad influences. Meanwhile, Carla now has female relationships, which she did not before. They also both now have jobs that they are responsible for. Their environment and social selves needed to change too.

Limitations and Future Research

The two participants of this study provided immense information to help reinforce the themes from the literature and give new insight to women's reintegration, however,

this research study is subject to a few limitations. The most significant limitation is the scarcity of the number of participants. Two participants are an insignificant number of respondents to be able to answer research questions. Since there are only two participants, who had been chosen through convenience sampling, these women are not representative of the population of women in prison. Since both participants are from a condensed area in the Midwest, this study can only be speculative of that geographical area.

Furthermore, there is a chance that the women were biased about their situations and told what they believed the interviewer wanted to hear. The findings only included the respondents' perspective, so while their accounts are assumed to be true, it is not guaranteed. For example, after the interviews were conducted, no contact was made to the prison to determine if it was true that the women were not offered any reentry programs, mental health treatment, and substance abuse treatment.

An additional limitation to the study is time constraint. The data collection was only able to take part over approximately a month, beginning May 20, 2022, to June 28, 2022. Due to this time constraint, there had to be a limited number of participants and an insubstantial recruitment strategy i.e., I was not able to recruit women from across multiple states or attempt alternative ways to recruit more participants.

Further studies on women's experience with reintegrating back into society after being released from prison should include significantly more participants, with varying demographics, from prisons across different geographical locations. Data collection should also take place over a longer period of time. With more time to conduct the study.

the researcher should also go to the prisons directly and get their perspective on what is, or is not, offered to the prisoners. In the event there is any discrepancies between what the prisons and participants claim, those inconsistencies could be further investigated. There is an amplitude of research on reentry, but more research can explore the gaps on why reintegration is often unsuccessful and why women who have been to prison are typically underprepared at the time of their release, leading to recidivism, relapse, mental health problems, and other complications that prevent them from being successful in mainstream society.

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APPENDICES

- A. Informed Consent
- B. Interview Guide
- C. Recruitment Flyer

A. Informed Consent Form

MINNESOTA STATE UNIVERSITY, MANKATO

Important Aspects to Women's Re-Integration; Positive Influences on Women's Reentry
Experience After Being Released from Prison

IRBNet Id Number: **1891412**

Informed Consent

This Informed Consent Form has two parts:

- Information Sheet
- Certificate of Consent

You will be given a copy of the full Informed Consent Form

Part I

Introduction

I, Sarah Benson, am working for Minnesota State University, Mankato, under the supervision of Dr. Paul Prew, Professor, on a research study about positive influences on women's reintegration back into society after being in prison. I will be providing you with information on this research study. I am inviting you to become a participant. If you consider participating, you may talk to anyone you feel comfortable talking with about the research, and you can take time to reflect on whether you would want to participate or not. If you do not understand some of the words or concepts, we will take time to explain them as we go along, and you can ask any questions at any time.

Purpose of the research

The purpose of this research study is to distinguish any significant influences on the experiences that women face when they are trying to re-enter society after having been in prison.

Type of Research Intervention

The research will consist of one-on-one, in-person interviews between you and myself.

Please initial here to indicate
that you have read this page:

Why you?

You are being invited to take part in this proposed research study because you fit the criteria we are looking for in a participant. We feel that your experience would be very beneficial to the findings of the study.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this research study is entirely voluntary. It is your decision on whether to participate or not. You may change your mind later on and stop participating at any time.

Procedures

We are asking you to help inform us on the specific experiences that you had when trying to re-enter society after being released from prison. The questions will consist of various things regarding what you, and/or the prison did to prepare you for your release. Some of the discussion may be sensitive. If you are not comfortable sharing certain information with the researcher—you do not have to answer. If you wish to review the interview questions before the interview, they can be sent to you to look over. The interviews will be audio recorded on my password-protected cellphone and then sent to my password-protected laptop to be transcribed. Once the audio recording has been sent to my laptop, it will be permanently deleted from my cellphone.

Interview location and duration

For your convenience, you will have the opportunity to choose the time, date, and location of the interview. The interview location should be a public place, with a private area where we can meet to ensure privacy and comfort—for example, a public library that has private meetings rooms. Interviews are expected to be somewhere from 45-90 minutes long.

Risks

As stated previously, sensitive topics will be discussed and may bring up personal issues. This could be a trigger for some, and cause emotional discomfort.

Compensation

You will be compensated for your participation. You can choose between a \$40 gift card for either gas or groceries. You will be given the gift card at the time of the interview.

Confidentiality

Please initial here to indicate
that you have read this page:

We will not share information about you to anyone other than Dr. Prew or myself. The information that we gather from this research project will be kept private. Any information about you will have a *pseudonym (changed name)* on it instead of your actual name. Only Dr. Prew and myself will know what your information is. It will not be shared. Your privacy is important and will be respected.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

You do not have to take part in the research study if you do not wish to do so. You may stop participating in the interview at any time.

If you have any questions about this research study, contact Sarah Benson at sarah.benson@mnsu.edu or at (507)-360-5663. If you have any questions about participants' rights and for research-related injuries, please contact the Administrator of the Institutional Review Board at 507-389-1242.

Your decision whether to participate will not affect your relationship with Minnesota State University, Mankato, and refusal to participate will involve no penalty.

Part II: Certificate of Consent

Please confirm that you are 18 years of age or older.

I am 18 years of age or older.

I have read all the above information, or it has been read to me. I have had the chance to ask questions about it and any questions I have been asked to have been answered. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study.

Print Name of Participant _____

Signature of Participant _____

Date _____

Day/month/year

B. Interview Guide

1. What reentry programs, if any, were offered at the prison that you were formerly incarcerated at? I.e., education programs. If applicable, did you partake in any of the programs?

2. Did the prison you were formerly incarcerated at have any sort of mentorship program? If so, please explain. If not, did you have any sort of mentorship relationship while in prison or once released? If applicable, how did this mentorship impact your reentry?

3. What steps did the prison you were formerly incarcerated at take to prepare you for release?

4. What, if anything, do you wish your prison would have done differently while you were incarcerated?

5. What, if anything, do you wish that *you* would have done differently while you were in prison to better prepare you for release?

6. At the time of your release, did you feel that you were prepared and ready to enter back into society? If you felt unprepared, how so?

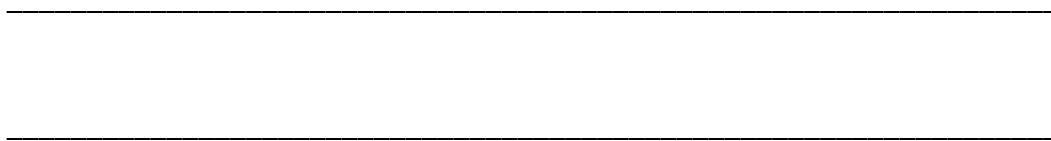
7. What were (are) your relationships like before/during/after prison? These relationships may include, but are not limited to: parents, partners, children, siblings, friends, neighbors, God, etc.

8. What was your sense of self before/during/after prison? Please explain.

9. How would you say your mental health has changed since being released back into society?

10. What advice would you give to women who are preparing to be released back into society? Please explain.

11. Is there anything else that you would like to discuss?



C. Recruitment Flyer

Minnesota State University, Mankato
 IRBNET NO: 1891412
 Conducted under direction of Dr. Paul Prew, Professor

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

For research study on women's
reintegration after being released
from prison

Information:
 A Sociology grad student from Minnesota State University, Mankato is looking for women volunteers, who have previously been incarcerated, to interview about their experiences with re-entry after being released from prison. Participation is voluntary and anonymous.

Interviews:
 The interviews are expected to take between 45-90 minutes and participant can choose the time/date/ location.

Compensation:

- \$40 gas or grocery gift card (participant can choose).

INTERESTED? WANT MORE INFO?
 CONTACT SARAH BENSON BY PHONE
 (TEXTING IS BEST) OR EMAIL:

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