THE EFFECTS OF MOTHERHOOD
ON A SAMPLE OF FEMALE DRUG OFFENDERS

by

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ABSTRACT

In the past, theories of desistance have focused on how relationships in offender’s lives reduce the likelihood of offending. However the demographics of today’s prisons have greatly changed since these theories were articulated, using samples of white males coming of age in the 1950s. Notably the number of women in prison has increased, as well as the percentage of minority and drug-involved offenders. This project is part of a larger study that examined official records of 1,247 offenders in the Delaware criminal justice system from 1979 through 2008. After trajectory models of desistance were calculated from official arrest data, 304 in-depth interviews were conducted from a random sample of former offenders from the original cohort originally released from prison in the early 1990s. The purpose of these interviews was to better understand the processes of how recidivism and desistance from crime occur. This thesis specifically examines the role motherhood plays in the desistance process through the narratives of interviews with females from the sample. While some literature suggests that becoming a mother creates a bond that facilitates desistence, there is also evidence that motherhood may also add further stress that may push offenders to continue doing crime and drugs.
Chapter 1
INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Having a child can bring about many changes in a person's life. You are now responsible for a life other than your own. A great amount of time, energy, and resources must be invested in order to ensure that the children are raised in the best possible situation. Unfortunately, some women are not in the prime situation when they first become mothers. There are those in desperate financial situations who may be resorting to illegal activity, just as a means of getting by, including selling and using drugs.

Years of previous research show how growing up in these conditions can impact the direction that the child's life may take, however there is less on how being a mother and the relationship between mother and child can influence deviant behavior. One would want to imagine a situation in which a woman completely changes for the sake of her child, but in reality it can be more fantasy than actuality. The maternal instinct, while on one hand may spark the motivation needed to desist, also presents unique challenges that prevent them from desisting. Mother’s have a conditioned set of biological and social responsibilities that differ from what is expected of fathers, and often conflict with the biological and social expectations of drug offenders. This makes it important to isolate mothers exclusively to see how these challenges impact their substance abuse.
Today's prison populations are rapidly changing to include an increasing number of women, most of them charged with drug related crimes and many also the mothers of one or more children. It is important to look at the interaction between motherhood and offending to see what changes can be made to the system to encourage the desistence of this demographic.

**Literature Review**

There are many theories that are used to explain an individual’s desistance from crime. Laub and Sampson (1993) believed that there are “turning points,” an event or events in individuals’ lives that change the criminal trajectories of individuals over their life-course. In their studies on a sample of delinquent boys coming of age in the 1950s, it was found that those whom were the most successful in desisting, experienced events that strengthened social bonds and allowed for the creation of responsibilities to which they had to be accountable (Laub & Sampson, 1993). Those who acquired stability through stable jobs, satisfying marriages, or military experience, had a greater likelihood to desist than those who had not developed similar bonds.

Laub and Sampson said that bonds such as these, gave a person “social capital,” which facilitates action, and in turn, leads to change. As asserted by this theory, it is less about changing one’s role than it is about emerging oneself into a social context and connecting to others in a way that creates a set of expectations and opportunities (Laub & Sampson, 1993).

Using this theory, one can see how motherhood could potentially be seen as a turning point. However, in relation to women, the generalizability of this study is
questionable. The sample that was used by Laub and Sampson consisted entirely of white males. They also grew up at a time of economic growth, contrasted by our current state of economic decline. Despite this, there may be circumstances in which this theory is supported.

Having a young child can serve as a motivating factor when women are attempting to abstain from illegal activity. This seems to have the most impact when the woman is incarcerated. If the mother is able to maintain contact with their child while in jail, upon release, they experience lower recidivism rates (Mignon, 2012).

Being a mother also seems to have positive effects when it comes to the woman's willingness to seek out treatment. Some women do attempt refraining from drugs in order to improve their children’s circumstance. However many competing factors can make it difficult for the individual to successfully complete treatment programs and stay clean in the long term (Robbins, 2009).

This inability to change may be magnified by resisting environmental and social factors that come with being a mother. Stigma, Pregnancy, and Reentry, in particular seem to have the strongest presence in the literature in terms of potential factors that prohibit the forming of bonds that would allow for motherhood to be a true turning point.

The Role of Stigma

The way others perceive us influences our behavior in our day-to-day lives, and can often shape how we perceive ourselves. Those that find themselves in a stigmatized group can experience negative by-products of this stigma on their own behavior. Mothers who use drugs are automatically set into three stigmatized groups: the drug user, women who used drugs, and the drug-using mother of a child. Each of
these carry their own set of assumptions and together can compel a user to continue their previous illegal activity and drug use.

One such assumption is that drugs leave the user a noncontributing member of society. When a child is thrown into the situation, that stigma is projected to the woman's relationship with her child and left responsible for any misfortunes that may cause the family difficulty. They may be seen as unfit to be mothers under this rational, and if the woman is not able to take care of herself, how is she to be entrusted with the care of a child? (Campbell, 2000; Schram, 2004). Sometimes the assumptions can work the other way, seeing a drug-using mother as too authoritarian or abusive as opposed to just lacking the discipline necessary to raise a child (Boyd, 1998). In addition men are not held to these same standards and therefore do not have to deal with this particular stigma. As a woman is thought to be responsible for that majority of the work involved as a mother, men are not held as accountable of taking care of children as women (Litzke, 2004). In other words, it is rare that you hear about the “substance abusing father.” These inconsistent ideals being forced onto an individual can cause a great deal of stress. If people are pushed away and looked down upon they may be less likely to form the strong social bonds that Sampson and Laub contend are likely to encourage desistance.

The stigma against mothers who use drugs can also be found in the form of formal social control. Across the board one of the mother's main fears is that they will have their children taken away (Mignon, 2012; Campbell, 2000; Boyd, 1998). However, Boyd states that there is not much difference in “childrearing practices, parental expectation, how the children were doing in school,” etc. when comparing families where the mother used drugs and those that did not (1998, p.15).
With this in mind, one could assume that it is not entirely the safety of the child that is being taken into an account, but rather punishment for breaking accepted gender roles of our society. There is a romanticized ideal of what a mother is supposed to look like and when a woman does not fit into this loving, nurturing fairy tale image, they are labeled as deviant (Boyd, 1998).

Race and socioeconomic status, too, seem to contribute to the role of stigmas. According to Boyd, “Poor women and women of color were seen as unable of nurturing and socializing their child” (1998, p. 9). In the same study, 70% of those charged for crimes against their children were women of color (Boyd, 1998). Society is taking away the agency and opportunities that women need in order to change their lives into the image of motherhood that is expected. Consequently, even if the bond between mother and child could facilitate change, the urge of society to take them out of a “bad situation” may decrease the likelihood of this potential turning point.

Pregnancy and Drugs

For a mother who is a drug user, the potential harmful effects that drugs may be having are not only affecting them, but their unborn child as well. This should be a prime chance for them to stop using so that the child is not harmed as well. Unfortunately, this is not always the case.

Along with being romanticized, motherhood has become medicalized. When it comes to the relationship between an addicted mother and her child, the medical profession views it as antagonistic (Boyd, 1998). Instead of providing a safe environment in which the fetus can grow, the mother’s womb often becomes a battleground. The woman’s doctor may label her as “at risk” and recommend that she quit using, however, quitting cold can be just as detrimental to the growing child as the
drugs themselves (Boyd, 1998). For example, the symptoms of withdrawal have been known to cause miscarriage (Campbell, 2000). Yet if the woman is unable to quit or chooses not to do so, she can be accused of failing to comply with medical advice or neglect, and can have her baby taken away at birth (Boyd, 1998; Schram, 2004). Conversely, if they do decide to seek treatment, they may still face negative consequences. In some cases when the woman goes for treatment they have been turned away at the door and then handed criminal charges (Campbell, 2000).

Difficulties with the lack of adaptation to women needs can also decrease the chances of them successfully completing a program if they are admitted (Robbins, 2009).

These issues may compel a woman to choose not to seek medical help in order to avoid prosecution. Problems may arise that are not necessarily related to the use of drugs as a result. Without proper medical care pregnant users typically do not have the access to the knowledge or resources to cope with their situations. For example, lack of proper nutrition or prenatal supplements can cause developmental issues outside of drug use. Even taking the effects of drugs into consideration, many women are not aware of the potential harm that their addiction can cause, until after the child is born (Boyd, 1998).

Prison and Reentry

Reentering society from prison presents many challenges for the recently released individual. They now must relearn how to fit back into society without falling into old habits that resulted in them being incarcerated in the first place. This requires rebuilding relationships that may have been damaged or put on hold by their imprisonment.
For women who already have children, many may hope to reestablish a relationship with their children, but this is not always an option. The correctional facility may have been too far away (Schram, 2004) making visits from their children while they were in prison infrequent. In a study by Casey-Avendo and Bakken (2002), only 39% of mothers in maximum security prisons were visited by their children at all. A weak bond between mother and child can create problems for the woman upon reentry.

This pattern of separation can continue even once the offender has been released. In the mother’s absence, the children are often left in the care of the offender's parents. When the mother is ready to reclaim her maternal status, the individuals left with the responsibility of caring for the child may call into question whether they are ready to resume this role (Brown, 2009). Women in this position are often also dealing with debt and lack of housing, further calling into question their ability to parent (Levingston & Turetsky, 2007). Much like the process of stigmatization, this can cause the ex-offender to feel worthless, and resort back to drugs to help cope with these feelings.

When an offender is separated from their children, the bond between them weakens, decreasing their social and parental capital (Laub & Sampson, 1993; Brown, 2009). Many mothers find that their children no longer respond to them with love and acceptance. Of course, the majority of these women love their children, but their authority as a parent has decreased (Brown, 2009). Brown contends that their incarceration has led to their “status as moral leader [being] discredited in public ways” (2009, p. 326). Especially with young children, the caregiver that has taken over in the mother absence has become their maternal figure and so the mother may
only feel as though she is on the periphery of her children's lives (Bruns, 1998; Brown, 2009). For the mother this may call into question their worth, potentially leading them to abandon their family under the assumption that her children are better off without her.

Each of these phenomena described above may decrease the impact of motherhood creating a social bond in drug-involved offenders, which in turn, may decrease the probability of motherhood becoming a turning point. The primary research question this thesis will address is whether motherhood increased the probability of women desisting from both drug use and crime. Using a sample of drug-involved offenders who were originally released in the early 1990s and interviewed in 2008, this thesis will examine the perceptions of formally drug-involved offenders when they were navigating their motherhood role.
Chapter 2

METHODS

This research relies on data obtained from a project that sought to examine the process of recidivism and desistance for a large sample of formally drug-involved offenders (Bachman et al. 2012). The original sample was composed of over 1,200 offenders who were originally released in the early 1990s. Official arrest records through 2008 were obtained for this original cohort, and a trajectory analysis resulted in 5 distinct categories of offending types. From each of these trajectory groups, a random sample was chosen to participate in in-depth interviews, which were conducted face-to-face in 2011 (n=304). The purpose of the interviews was to more fully understand the processes by which respondents either desisted or persisted in substance abuse and crime. Respondents were asked about their family background, their history with crime and drugs, various decisions they have made during their lives, along with the factors that have both hindered and helped them in the desistance process. This thesis will examine the narratives obtained from the interviews of 118 of the females in the sample.

The narratives were then transcribed into Word and imported into a qualitative software program, called Nvivo, to be coded. The initial categories were developed from the existing literature on desistance including such key indicators as turning points, indicators of agency and readiness for change, and the psychological indicators of discontent. Passages were then coded to reflect the content of the interviews. For the purposes of this project, specific attention is being given to passages related to the
“effect of children on substance use and crime” code. In reading these passages, narratives were examined that illuminated the complex interaction between a woman’s role as a mother and her drug use and criminal activity. Themes emerged that articulated the differential effects of motherhood on substance use and desistance. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, all names in the following section are pseudonyms.

**Limitations**

One of the main limitations of these interview data is their reliability. Since urine samples were not obtained, the study is not able to ascertain whether offenders were being honest about their drug or alcohol use. All respondents were told that the study had obtained recent arrest and incarceration data, which served to increase the validity of their responses.
Chapter 3

FINDINGS

Much as the literature would suggest having children, for this sample of drug and crime-involved sample of mothers, had a variety of effects on their ability to get clean. Two distinct ways were identified in which children can impact a woman's criminal activity: directly and indirectly. For the purposes of this study, direct effects include situations where there are direct links between having a child and the change that occurs in their behavior, whether it is positive or negative. This includes the relationship with the child, physically carrying and giving birth to a child, the care of the child, and feelings about how their activity impacts their children. Indirect effects will be seen as situations and relationships that are associated or complicated by having children. Indirect effects can potentially be the living situation, involvement of others in their lives, and any feelings of guilt and remorse at the inability to be a good parent.

Direct Negative

Although not common, the mothers who experienced direct negative effects primarily did so when they experienced a bad relationship with their children. Sometimes, the anxiety created when the mother and child were separated, either through the subject’s incarceration or an exchange in custody was the cause. When this occurred early in their child’s life, the extended separation served to create a rift that made it difficult to reestablish their relationship when they were released from
prison. Most often this manifested as the child's inability to call them “mom,” causing the women to feel significant pain and loss. If it did not directly contribute to her drug use, it created an environment that made her more open to using. Sara describes this result well:

Sara: Just about getting high, and because I didn’t have my children in my life I still believed strongly in my heart that’s what led me to do all the things that I did

Interviewer: Did you ever think that if you got clean that you could get your children back? Or did you have no hope that you could get your children back?

Sara: I didn’t think that I’d ever get them back because they stopped calling me mommy, they would’ve fought me.

Here Sara directly draws the connection between her children and what motivated her to continue using drugs. Of course, in this narrative, Sara does not make the connection that her substance use and incarceration were the reason why her children were taken, however, her inability to resume her role as mother clearly affected her ability to stay clean once she was released from prison. It was only when she started to live with her daughter that was Sara able to get clean, and stayed that way for 4 years.

Others also reported distress when it came to being seen as the primary maternal figure. Mary's child was taken into the custody by her mother, and she prevented Mary from seeing him. Her son consequently referred to her by a nickname instead of mom. She tried to re-connect as a maternal figure for him, but without a job she resorted to stealing, and eventually ended up on the street. Nicole also experienced a similar situation. Her children were in the custody of their father and were calling
their stepmother mom. It was during this time, that she began stealing from her job to buy drugs.

Nicole: Like I said they’re still my family even regardless of what happened and when I was at the work-release program this time, they told my mom, tell her come see us. Now because again, I don’t want to go back or make them think they have to hire me just because XX being there or whatever.

Interviewer: Now when you were taking the money, did you ever think of consequences?

Nicole: I didn’t care about it at the time.

Interviewer: Why were the consequences not a factor?

Nicole: Because at the time I figured eh, so what, somebody gotta take care of their kids and I did alright. And some of the last part a little bit but it's little things getting along because now I have a friend.

Interviewer: Never thought about the future, did you ever think about losing that relationship with your girls?

Nicole: I already have, I've lost it.

Like Mary, she wanted to provide for her child, but as a recovering addict with a record, she felt as though her only way of doing so was through less legitimate means. The result was their children only being pushed away further.

**Direct Positive**

Becoming a mother did have positive effects for some. Several who knew the potential impact it could have on their children were able to quit for the duration of the pregnancy. However, this abstinence was often short lived, and many returned to drugs within months and even days of giving birth. It is still important to recognize this as a motivation for desisting.
Some were very cognizant of the damage their drug use could have on their unborn babies. Melissa recounted what she had seen the effects of drug use on babies through a relative. “That baby got addicted. My cousin had a crack baby and damn, they are shaky and I don’t want that shit.” Consequently she did not use throughout either of her pregnancies. Melissa also refused to give drugs to other women who were using. Later in the interview she revealed that she fully intended to remain clean after her pregnancy and had a good job, but eventually ended up turning back to drugs.

Many others desisted for the term of their pregnancy but also fell short in the long run. For example, Ellen had very good intentions to remain clean:

Interviewer: What about your son? How do you feel now that you have this baby who’s gorgeous and you’re smoking again? I don’t ask you like you should feel a certain way, if you don’t care you don’t care.

Ellen: No, I do. I was planning recovery when I got pregnant.

Interviewer: And you stayed clean throughout that pregnancy?

Ellen: Yes, but after he was born and everything, I told you I went and got a car, and then I went and got high. So what was supposed to be this joyous moment in my life, and I was doing so excellent and well, like they wanted me to be a manager at this recovery house in XXX

1, and everything, and when I got pregnant they didn’t want me to leave. Like I could stay there without paying rent, and I was an asset I guess. And then I came back home, because I was on like total bed rest and everything at my mom’s, and after I had my baby, I got high like a month or two later. So, I don’t know, I mean I believe he’s helped me, but I don’t think you can do it [get clean] for anybody.

1 Names of locations are erased to protect the confidentiality of the respondents.
Despite her return to using drugs so soon after her son’s birth, Ellen did state that it helped her stay in touch with her mother so that when she did slip she had means of support as she tried to find her way on the road to recovery.

Some women were motivated by the realization that they did not want their children exposed to the environment that being involved in criminal activities creates. One woman bluntly stated that she “didn't want to drag [her child] through the muck.” Elizabeth gained the agency necessary to do the same thing after an encounter with the police opened her eyes to the effect it was having on her children.

Elizabeth: when my daughter was crying that day the cops were there, you know the oldest one, she saw the cops and got all upset. That woke me up. My brother came and got them because I didn’t want the state to take the kids and that just woke me up – I said I couldn’t do this to my kids, man, because god had blessed me with these children and he wanted me to be responsible for these children, so that was it.

Similarly, Lauren seemed to be motivated to stay clean by her responsibility to her son in that she “didn't want [her] son to do or see the things, and [she] didn't want to leave him again.”

For others the responsibility of having children itself made them desist. After being released from prison, Margaret felt that in order to stay clean that she needed to take back the responsibility of caring for her children.

“But then along with them giving us tools they taught me how to be responsible and how to live up to your responsibility. My mom was like, oh I got them, and I felt that need to be like no, I need to be responsible today. So I did that, and got the kids”

It should also be noted that whatever treatment she received also played a role in resuming her motherhood role. The joining factor between all these women was that
they all were motivated by the possibility of making their children's lives better by changing their own behavior.

**Indirect Negative**

In many of these women’s lives, their children’s father was still playing a parental role. However, this was often a negative role for the women as the men frequently were a source for drugs, either providing them directly or creating an environment in which they were easily obtained. Georgia tells about her child’s father and his friends introduced her to illegal substances in the first place.

**Interviewer:** What did you do? Take me back to that scene. What were you doing?

**Georgia:** I was going with my son, at the time I was 19 when I had my second son, I was going with his father. His father was a heroin addict, IV user. Anyway I had met him and I was going with him by the time I was 20 I was curious about I would see him and another one of his friends go into the bathroom and come back out they just looked like they were feeling real good and mellow.

Many other women seem to have similar experiences. It would seem that even if the child's father is not involved with drugs at the start of the relationship, if they fall into using again, it often facilitates the woman use as well. This does not appear to be a reaction to her husband or boyfriend doing them, but rather the stressful environment that being around drugs creates, coupled with the stress of having children within this environment, which both serve to increase strain and compel them to use. Mila had a long history of being in relationships with drug users. When they were first together, her latest husband had not been involved with drugs. After a friend introduced him, her situation only became worse:
“He ended up quitting his job and just going whole, hall, hog, then he was. So then I’m right back into that lifestyle and then, you know, I mean big quantities were in my house and I have these babies. I have my son and then I have my daughter who’s a newborn. So I started becoming I think depressed. And that’s when I started using. That’s when I started using.”

Other women found themselves in situations where their children were taken away from them, and experienced a similar strain leading to or furthering their drug use. Deanna reported only turning to drugs after the children's father took them away. When asked how exactly this made her feel she said, “I felt real empty; I really believe that's what led me to drugs. That's what I believe because I could not see my children.” Similar to Mila, the depression she experienced led to her drug use.

**Indirect Positive**

There are only a few occasions where children indirectly influenced the subjects gaining of agency to turn their lives in a positive direction. In both cases, the subjects perceived they needed to take control of their lives in order to change. Maria decided that this meant that she would be better off to get support from “people who were struggling, women with children like [she] was in order for [her] to try to get a step ahead.” Those that had also gone through this situation with their own children, she perceived, would be more able to understand her situation.

On the other hand, Alice felt that she was better off on her own so she could focus on herself. She chose to have her children stay with her sister, and she stayed single as a way of taking back control so she could work through her problems. In both scenarios the women chose to create an environment that would both benefit their children and allow them to remain clean at the time.
Children Did Not Matter

The reality for many of the women in this sample was that their addiction prevented them from maintaining any social bonds, including bonds with their children. Children were often simply perceived as another obstacle to getting high. Wilma said when asked if she thought of the consequences for her children of her drug use, “I always missed my kids, always, always missed my kids but the drugs just wouldn’t let me stop. And then I knew that they were taken care of anyway cause they were with my family, they were with my mom or their dad.” Wilma clearly cared about her children to some extent but this was not stronger than her need for drugs. Wilma also reflected that she liked the power and the money that drugs allowed her, and was also unable to quit while she was pregnant. The drugs completely took over her sense of self. Deidre experienced a similar situation where her need for drugs became the only thing that was important; she pushed away all of those who could have potentially helped her, including her family and her children.

Deidre: And I found myself in doing the drug, I started getting charges and being on probation, I did prostituting, I did everything I could to get money to get the drug. And that’s when it didn’t matter

Interviewer: What didn’t matter?

Deidre: Me taking care of the children, being with my mom, living with my mom, things just didn’t matter. Finding a job, it just didn’t matter. Being on probation, it just didn’t matter. Ya know, from 85-94 it just didn’t matter

Interviewer: Why didn’t any of that matter?

Deidre: Because those people wouldn’t listen to me were in the way. Only the people I was doing drugs with, or the people I was getting the drugs from mattered.
In both Deidre and Wilma's cases their actions also resulted in bad relationships with their children, however, the relationships themselves do not seem to be what caused them to continue to use. The disintegrating relationships with their families and children were the result of their drug use, not the cause.
Chapter 4
DISCUSSION

Balancing the relationship between drugs and the role and responsibilities that come with being a mother can be a struggle as reflected in many of the narratives above. While motherhood did not provide a turning point to desistance, as predicting by Sampson and Laub (1993), when women were ready to get clean, motherhood did provide a very important motivation to “stay clean this time.” One mechanism for this change was a change in women’s self-perceptions.

While none of the women explicitly sited stigma as the motivating factor for their drug use, some by-products of stigma could be seen in the narratives. This seemed more clear in situations where the respondent’s children were directly involved in a negative turning point. The issue children referring to them as “mother” or “mom” came up frequently. “Mom” is a loaded title and seen as an important role that also carries certain burdens. At the same time it is one that is taken for granted and assumed will come with the territory of giving birth. Hence, there is a sense of betrayal when removed. As seen in this study, it is also a role that is harder to reclaim than it is to lose. The primary way it is lost seems to be through extended separation, either because the woman is incarcerated, the children are taken away, or getting high remains the primary goal during the days while children are left with friends or left to fend for themselves. Very few interviews mention any prison programs that helped maintain relationships with their children. Genevieve was one of the few who did talk in detail about a program that allowed her daughter to have overnight visits while she
was in prison. Being connected to her mother does seem to have helped her relationship with her daughter, who did call her mom. It also motivated her to try to turn her life around once released. Unfortunately other elements, such as her inability to get a job because of her record, made it much more difficult for this to become a reality.

Many of the women interviewed for this project had been sentenced to long prison terms, while others were in and out of prison on a frequent basis. These times of separation usually made becoming reunited with their children virtually impossible in the worst cases, and extremely stressful in most others. Especially when their children were young, they may have grown up not knowing their mother and probably perceiving some other female figure as their mother. When trying to reclaim the role, it was not always the child who was the strongest opposing force, but instead the person that was left in charge of the children. Mary, whose children had been left in the care of her mother while she was away, experienced such a struggle. “He wouldn’t call me mom for a long time until one day I just told him that I would rather he called me mom even though I wasn’t’ there. My mom told me to let him call me mother when he got ready to, but I thought that was wrong.” From Mary's point of view it seemed as though the grandmother did not trust the mother with her own child. Understandably, it is likely because of her criminal activity and the grandmother’s perception and/or fear that her daughter may not stay away from drugs and may not be able to become a successful mother.

These problems are made worse by other factors impacting their self-esteem including economic deprivation, particularly when unable to obtain employment providing a livable wage once released from prison. Many of the women in this
sample began their lives in lower socioeconomic statuses, without little education or job skills. This background when combined with a record made finding employment virtually impossible. Many, like Mary, turned to stealing as a means of providing for their children. The environmental context in which these women lived was highly influential in the interactions between mother and child, and whether this had any effect on their drug use. When women perceived they had a sense of control over their environments, this often gave them the agency they needed to desist.

Even when only quitting for the duration of the pregnancy, this often proved to a women that they were capable of abstaining from substance use, if only short-term. If they felt responsible for their unborn baby’s health, they were also more likely to feel responsible for the their children after birth.

The control these women may have perceived over their bodies was also short lived. Once their baby was born, their drug use no longer had a direct impact on the child’s development. Many then went back to using drugs within months or days of giving birth. They no longer had control over the environment that their children were in or at least perceived that they did not. The stress of this responsibility and their inability to live up to the motherhood role often led them back to the drugs that were familiar and provided a sense of comfort.

One of the more prevalent themes that came up while speaking of their children and drug use was the relationship that they had with a significant other. For most women, their children’s father had very little involvement with them, which left their children staying with their grandmother. However, a nontrivial number of men were involved in their children’s lives, sometimes as a positive provider, but also frequently as the facilitator of substance use for the mother.
The cases where children affected no change in women’s substance abuse and crime are perhaps most interesting because they also appear to be the most dire. In these situations, women’s drug use completely took over nearly every aspect of their lives. Despite any feeling they may have had for their children, the drugs became more important. They seemed indifferent or even grateful when the children were taken away, unlike many others in similar situations. These women also seemed convinced that they had little chance of taking control of their lives, and they no longer cared about what happened to them, often expecting to end up dead. The combination of these factors causes a very dangerous mindset.

**Policy Implications**

Although the new role of motherhood did not appear to provide a turning point away from substance abuse and crime for this sample of women, the connection with their children once ready to get clean was a very strong motivating factor. As such programs and policies in correctional settings that increase the probability of mothers staying connected to their children can only serve to increase the probability of desistance upon release. It is also important for correctional administrators to understand that many offenders’ families had understandably given up on them, with little faith that they would ever get clean. As such, programs are also needed to facilitate healing the wounds that may have developed in family members whose loved one has been recycling in and out of prison, with mechanisms for reestablishing these connections along with other aspects of restorative justice.

Finally, the narratives reveal that few external forces actually served to deter substance use, including family ties or the threat of going back to prison. Only when
they were ready to get clean, having come to the realization that their life would be completely ruined or they may die if they continued, did the women in this sample succeed in getting clean. This implies that programs aimed at facilitating these cognitive connections (i.e. if I continue to use drugs, I will die), are also important in the recovery process. Cognitive-behavioral theory may be an effective intervention strategy to accelerate this process. Cognitive-behavioral therapy, which has been shown to be one of the more effective prison-based therapy programs in terms of reducing recidivism (Lipsey, Landenberger, & Wilson, 2007), is premised upon providing clients with better cognitive skills including but not limited to the skills necessary to identify problems and the consideration of alternative courses of action to solve those problems, the evaluation of possible solutions before adopting a course of action, provision of critical reasoning and rational deliberation skills, the importance of long-term planning, and the importance of taking the position of other people within one’s social environment.

In sum, the narratives of these women illustrate that desistance from substance use and crime is typically and long-term outcome, marked by periods of abstinence and relapse, often resulting in being sent back to prison. Unfortunately, having ties to conventional others like family along with a criminal record produces and environment that is not very conducive to successful reintegration upon release from prison.
REFERENCES


