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WOMEN RETURNING TO THEIR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES AFTER INCARCERATION: THEIR NEEDS, CONCERNS AND CHALLENGES

Julius Johnson

University of Kentucky, jdjo235@g.uky.edu

Author ORCID Identifier:

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9997-8831>

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Julius Johnson, Student

Dr. Rosalind Harris, Major Professor

Dr. Patricia Dyk, Director of Graduate Studies

WOMEN RETURNING TO THEIR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES AFTER
INCARCERATION: THEIR NEEDS, CONCERNS AND CHALLENGES

THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Community and Leadership
Development in the
College of Agriculture, Food and Environment
at the University of Kentucky

By

Julius Johnson

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Rosalind Harris Professor of Sociology and Community & Leadership
Development

Lexington, Kentucky

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<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9997-8831>

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

WOMEN RETURNING TO THEIR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES AFTER INCARCERATION: THEIR NEEDS, CONCERNS AND CHALLENGES

The voices of women in re-entry from prison have been muted for many decades. Prior research conducted on men and prison re-entry has been used to shape not only prisons but also the reentry process for women. It is because of this oversight that the gender-specific needs of women in the justice system have gone unnoticed. Once released, formerly incarcerated women face the almost impossible task of finding employment. Many women who find employment have found that their wages do not help them move out of poverty. Trying to find adequate housing becomes an issue not only because of their criminal records, but because they do not make enough money. The Landlords want to know how much the women make in order to see if they can pay the rent. Due to these issues, many women find themselves living in neighborhoods located in areas where their previous trauma experiences occurred.

In this study, ten women participated in individual interviews and a focus group session, wherein they discussed intimate details of their lives, through childhood, incarceration and the reentry process. Fatherless homes and early childhood sexual trauma were found to be prevalent in this study. This study was conducted to better understand the needs, concerns and challenges of women returning to their communities after incarceration.

Keywords: Reentry, sexual trauma, prisons, incarceration, employment, housing, formerly incarcerated women

Julius Johnson

08/07/2020

WOMEN RETURNING TO THEIR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES AFTER
INCARCERATION: THEIR NEEDS, CONCERNS AND CHALLENGES

By

Julius Johnson

Dr. Rosalind Harris

Director of Thesis

Dr. Patricia Dyk

Director of Graduate Studies

11/30/2020

DEDICATION

I want to dedicate this thesis to Lorna Harris, a dear friend of mine who lost her battle with cancer in 2009. It was during the last few weeks of her life that she expressed to me some of the joys and disappointments. I would stay many nights with her in the hospital because she was terrified of being alone. We would stay up many nights, and she would tell me not to take life for granted. Just before she passed, she told me her biggest fear was being forgotten because she did not have any children. I dedicate this thesis to her so that her name will forever be linked to women who are fighting every day to change their lives for the better.

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digging within myself deep enough. This wise counsel has spilled into my personal life, and I can now look in the mirror and say, “I see you”.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Background and Setting

Thousands of individuals are released from prisons and jails every year. They reenter society with the hope of finding employment, housing, and for many, reuniting with their families. Upon release, they find their criminal record hinders them from adequate employment and housing (Bushway and Apel, 2012). One of the residual effects of not having adequate housing and employment is reunification with family members. Reconnecting with families is challenging for many because of circumstances surrounding their record. These are the challenges people in re-entry face at an alarming rate.

The historical context for understanding these challenges is the Reagan era War on Drug policies, that have extended from the 1980s to the present day. These policies are largely responsible for the alarming rate of men and women going to prison (Alexander, 2012). Since the War on Drug policies and practices were implemented, millions have found themselves going back and forth through the revolving doors of incarceration.

The literature and research on prison populations usually focus on Black and Latino male populations. Although the largest rate increase in the prison population has been for Black and Latina women, there has been very little research focused on their challenges and struggles prior to incarceration, during incarceration and during the re-entry process. Trends indicate that “[w]omen in

jail are the fastest growing correctional population in the country-increasing 14-fold between 1970 and 2014. Yet there is so little research on why women wind up in jail” Swavola, Riley and Subramanian, 2016). Such studies have investigated the needs, concerns and challenges of women reentering their communities from prison as told through the stories of their experiences. This study will investigate the lives of ten women who have gone through and are going through the re-entry process. These stories will be from the women’s perspectives.

Reflexive Interlude

This research project has been humbling for me from the beginning. I am the director of a prison re-entry program, and I was also formerly incarcerated. Because I am a man who has been formerly incarcerated, I have an in depth understanding of the male perspective on incarceration and the re-entry process. However, having focused my academic years around women in re-entry and my role as director of a re-entry program, I now have a broader understanding of incarcerated women. When I started to look at the gender-specific challenges of women in reentry however, I quickly realized there was a lot I did not know. As I started to look at the challenges of women in re-entry, a common theme that I found throughout the literature was their experiences with sexual trauma and childhood sexual abuse. Sexual trauma and childhood sexual abuse are important to me. Five months after my release from prison, I learned that my mother was sexually abused as a child and that my birth resulted from abuse. Throughout this process I have thought about my mother and what could have been.

Over the past five years, I have realized the women who are going through the re-entry process are crying out for help, but they cry out in a different way from men. In fact, many were never truly taught how to express their deepest pain. This study is being conducted to not only hear their cries, but to have a better understanding of the ways in which they have been silenced.

The following literature review of the unique challenges of incarcerated and transitioning women will complete this introductory chapter. Chapter II will discuss the guiding theoretical frameworks of strain theory and feminist theory. Chapter III will discuss the two-pronged qualitative methodology that was employed. Chapter IV will discuss the study findings. Chapter V will discuss the conclusions and recommendations from the study.

Literature Review: The Challenges of Incarcerated and Transitioning Women

As indicated above, the rate of increase for incarcerated women is the fastest growing prison demographic and therefore re-entry demographic (Valencia, 2017). To date, men in prison have been the focal point of many re-entry studies; therefore, it is important to understand the unique re-entry challenges that women face. Essentially, the gender-specific needs and experiences of women returning home have been overlooked (Ward, 2017). It is important to investigate the gender-specific experiences of those impacted by incarceration. For instance, studies have found that between 60 % to 95% of incarcerated women have been sexually traumatized (Johnston, 2015; Johnson and Lynch, 2012). A comparison study conducted in Texas prisons found that women

reported significantly more maltreatment in childhood than men. The study also found a link between drug abuse and women's childhood trauma (McClellan, et.al, 1997). The lack of understanding the trauma that these women have experienced increases the likelihood of re-traumatization as they re-enter their communities.

Having a criminal record creates barriers to finding employment and housing. Barriers to employment subsequently affect housing opportunities. Not having the means to pay for housing because they lack employment is a challenge many women face. In fact, "women who had precarious housing situations in locations where they lacked autonomy were particularly vulnerable to predation, relapse and re-incarceration" (Bushway and Apel, 2012). Researchers have found those who have a plan for housing and employment increase their chances of having success through the re-entry process (Bushway, S. and R. Apel, 2012). An additional issue these women face is the wage gap between men and women. According to Amanda Ward (2017), women have a difficult time climbing out of poverty because of the lack of opportunities for upward mobility.. The data confirm that for women in the U.S. there is a glass ceiling in accessing opportunities for better paying jobs. Women have made huge strides, but breaking through the glass ceiling is particularly daunting for formerly incarcerated women.

In the book "*Prisoner Once Removed*," Waul and Travis (2003) identified that the leading stressor for women in prison and in re-entry is concern for the well-being of their children. Researchers have found that women who are working towards getting their children have a better chance of staying out of prison (Michalsen, 2007). For mothers in

re-entry, it is not simply finding housing for themselves, but a place they feel they can turn into a home for their whole family. The success of women in re-entry is closely tied to the well-being of their children. Children who have incarcerated parents have an increased likelihood themselves of being incarcerated, dropping out of school, developing learning disabilities, suffering from depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and homelessness (Morsey and Rothstein 2017; Turney, 2017). Women in re-entry have a strong desire to enter the work force and to be successful and productive citizens. However, the reality of how their criminal records hinder these hopes quickly takes its toll on the motivated individual (Wright, 2012). The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of what women in re-entry experience. The women in this study are a voice for many that are in similar situations. With a better understanding of the gender-specific needs of these women, service providers will be able to tailor their programs to address gender- specific barriers.

Research Objectives

This study is guided by the following research objectives:

RO1: Describe the pre-incarceration experiences of women in re-entry;

RO2: Describe how strain theory provides a framework for understanding deviance and criminal activity for women before and after incarceration;

RO3: Describe the gender specific needs of women in reentry;

RO4: Describe the low-wage pay-scale for women in reentry;

RO5: Describe how a criminal record creates a barrier for both housing and employment;

RO6: Describe how sexual trauma is prevalent for women in reentry;

RO7: Describe how childhood exposure to criminal activity increases the likelihood for incarceration as an adult;

RO8: Describe how the neighborhood that the women return to increases stress and the likelihood of re-traumatization and reincarceration;

RO9: Describe the motivators for women in reentry;

RO10: Describe how women in re-entry have lack of trust for those in positions to help;

RO11: Describe how mental illness is prevalent for women in reentry.

Definition of Terms

Jail: operated at a local level, jails hold those being detained before trial, holds individuals that have been sentenced and are waiting to be transferred to prison, and individuals with sentences that are less than 1 year (Belcher, 2019).

Parole: a period of conditional supervised release in the community following a prison term (Kaeble, Maruschak, and Bonczar, 2015).

Prison: Institutions that confine convicted felons who have been sentenced to more than 1 year (Belcher, 2019).

Probation- “is a court-ordered period of correctional supervision in the community, generally as an alternative to incarceration.

Recidivism: Re-arrested for another crime (Maltz, 1984). It is important to note that recidivism has many definitions (e.g. committed another crime, criminal behavior, or simple infractions for probation or parole).

Re-entry: activities conducted to prepare ex-convicts to return safely to the community and to live as law abiding citizens (Petersilia, 2003).

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

I integrated strain theory and feminist theory into a guiding framework for this study.. Strain theory asserts that the barriers to living up to societal norms leads to crime and deviance (Agnew,1992). In this study strain theory is used to understand the stressors placed on the women who are released from incarceration, and the barriers they face in trying to succeed. Feminist theories are used to help explain the obstacles these women face. While working on this project the feminist theories of gender difference, gender inequality, gender oppression, and structural oppression helped me to better understand and explain how prevalent “strain” is in the lives of these women.

Strain Theory

Strain Theory was developed by Robert K. Merton. This theory puts forward that the stress of trying to overcome the barriers to achieve societal norms is the root cause of deviance and crime (Agnew, 1992). The literature review on incarcerated and transitioning women indicates that it is the stress associated with not finding viable employment, living arrangements, reconciliations with family and community and not being prepared to care for their children that resulted in high rates of recidivism (Ward, 2017).

Though strain theory is a relatively modern concept, its origins can be traced to Emile Durkheim’s theory of anomie (Bernard, 1987). It is important to understand anomie in order to have a better grasp of Merton’s strain Theory. Both theories look at the social influence on individual behavior. Strain theory focuses on crime and deviance,

Durkheim's research, employing anomie as a framework, focused on suicide. Durkheim focused on suicide in three countries: France, England and Denmark. He did not look at the solitary act of suicide; instead, he focused his research on the significant links to various social factors. These social factors were a person's 1) cohesiveness; 2) standing in the community; and 3) religious, social and occupational standings. Durkheim's study found:

1. Integration: Lower levels of suicide with higher levels of integration;
2. Religion: Those without religion had a higher suicide rate;
3. Marriage: Unmarried people had a higher suicide rate;
4. Military: Soldiers had a higher rate of suicide than civilians;
5. Times of Peace and War: There are a higher rate of suicide in times of peace. It is lower in times of war;
6. Economy: Suicide rates are higher during difficult economic times;
7. Wealth: Wealthy individuals have higher rates of suicide;
8. Sex: Males have higher rates than females; and
9. Race: Whites have the highest suicide rates.

Durkheim did not dismiss the fact that suicide was a solitary act. He wanted to look at the beliefs, values, norms and traditions of the three countries to see if these social factors had any influence on suicide.

In comparison Robert Merton wanted to show how social structures had a major influence in criminal and deviant behaviors. Where Durkheim looked at France, Denmark and England, Merton looked at the United States and the concept of the American Dream (Messner and Rosenfield, 2013). Merton wanted to show how social structures in America pushed individuals to criminal activities. According to Durkheim for a society to function, the masses in a society need to come to an understanding of what is normal and acceptable. Durkheim's research looked at the barriers for those trying to reach societal norms. His research found correlations between the societal barriers and failures to achieving societal norms leading to suicide. Merton's research also looks at societal norms and the barriers to achieving them; however, instead of leading to insights about suicide, his findings led to insights about crime and deviance (Messner and Rosenfield, 2013). Merton hypothesized that the idea of the American dream was set by societal norms. His research found that societal norms were set, but the means to achieve them were not guaranteed equally, creating barriers for many in low-income neighborhoods. For many, having a nice car or the big house with the picket fence is the American dream and not the American reality. Individuals newly released from prison find adhering to societal norms an impossible goal. This thesis focuses on women that are in the re-entry process from prison, and how they attempt to work toward living up to societal norms.

The rate of women in prison is growing rapidly (Valencia, 2017). It is important that we look at what is causing women to be caught in the endless cycle of recidivism. Merton's strain theory has been revised many times in sociological and criminological research. Strain Theory can be a very useful tool when looking at women in re-entry.

In recent years, opponents of Strain Theory note that it cannot explain why people who go through the same experiences as those who commit crime, do not fall into the criminal lifestyle (Brezina, 1987). It is my belief nevertheless that this is an important guiding framework for explaining why those who do commit crimes choose to do so, although it cannot explain why individuals who go through similar experiences as those committing crimes chose a different path.

Feminist Theory

In addition to Robert Merton's Strain Theory, feminist theory guides this exploration of the re-entry challenges women face. Four dimensions of feminist theory are part of the integrated theoretical framework used in this study. The four feminist frameworks I will use in this study are gender differences, gender inequalities, gender oppression and structural oppression (Crossman, 2017). These dimensions help to illuminate the gender dynamics that make the re-entry process more challenging for women than men, due to the gendered nature of the labor market, skewed wage scale and roles in children's lives, for instance. The concerns of incarcerated women, and those in the re-entry process, largely go unaddressed because the needs of this population have been eclipsed by attention to the concerns of transitioning men. It is the heart of this research project to not bombard women with questions, but to listen to them as they speak about their authentic experiences in the re-entry process.

Gender Differences

In societies all over the world, gender roles are one of the most identifiable aspects of a community. Most cultures around the world would consider themselves patriarchal. The modern idea of women being the breadwinner was unheard of not too long ago. The American dream role for women was the role of housewife while the men went off to work outside of the home to provide for the family (Messner and Rosenfield, 2013). Employment opportunities for the most part in America had been in fields such as factory work and construction jobs. Clerical jobs, for the most part, were considered women's work. These jobs paid considerably less than factory and construction jobs, where men's employment has been historically concentrated. These are examples of how gender roles and wage-pay gendered differences have impacted our society. Gender roles have implicit prescriptions, such as men should be the provider, so they should make more money. As stated earlier, this hinders women from being able to climb up the labor force stratification ladder. Trying to find employment after incarceration can be challenging. A criminal record is a huge barrier to being successful in re-entry. Simply having a job is not necessarily the key to success. Having a decent paying job is essential. The employment opportunities for individuals coming home from prison with what is considered decent pay are often in factories and construction work. These jobs are usually given to men.

Moreover, women in the re-entry process are usually turned down for traditional clerical jobs because of their criminal records. These employment opportunities typically pay enough for women to eventually work themselves out of poverty. However, the employment opportunities women have when released from prison are often low-wage, menial jobs, in restaurants for example. Gainful employment is a key component to a successful re-entry process because it allows an individual to find housing in a safe community.

Mothers in re-entry often focus their energy towards getting custody of their children. The barriers to gaining their family back are daunting when they are not able to provide adequate living accommodations for their children. It is harder for these mothers to have any type of upward mobility when they are not paid adequately. Gendered differences will be used to investigate employment experiences for this project.

Gender Inequalities

The gender inequality dimension of feminist theory looks at how women are excluded from different areas of society. There are some similarities to gender difference. Gender difference focuses on the physical differences between men and women, whereas gender inequalities focuses on how women are treated as opposed to how men are treated. In a patriarchal society, a man is given more opportunities than women. These opportunities allow men to make decisions not only in their households but also in jobs and politics

The gender inequality issue has been well documented throughout the history of the United States. For example, the Suffrage Movement was started in 1848 to challenge the societal norms of that time. It was not until seventy years later that laws were changed which gave women the right to vote (Meade, 2018). Women have always had to fight to bring changes to inequalities they have faced. A look at the gender inequality dimension in re-entry is important because there are many aspects of the incarceration and re-entry system that are overlooked. Gender-specific needs must be addressed in order to level the playing field for women in re-entry. As stated in Merton's Strain Theory, an individual that cannot live up to what is considered normal by society can be pushed to pursue crime and deviant behaviors. For instance, we cannot just look at getting women jobs; getting better paying jobs must be emphasized.

Gender Oppression

Theories of gender oppression go further than gender differences and gender inequalities. This dimension of feminist theory not only identifies the differences and inequalities for women in society, but it also looks at the active oppression and abuses of power against women. Women in patriarchal societies experience this abuse of power, in many ways it is through the abuse of power that women are placed in situations that seem to render them helpless.

Gender oppression is an important aspect to look at when trying to understand how oppression is involved with women in the re-entry process. One issue of gender oppression that has been prevalent within this population is sexual trauma. Studies have

shown that there are many women in prison and re-entry who have either been sexually abused or witnessed a sexually abusive act. A study done by the ACLU found that 92% of incarcerated women have been sexually abused (Newman, 2016). Many of these abusive acts were committed by individuals who were considered authority figures. These authority figures have been family members or individuals that were close to the family. This abuse has been committed by individuals that should have been there to protect them.

The oppression continues when the abuse of power moves from childhood into adulthood. Many of the oppressive acts occur when women are treated poorly by those that could help them, but these people abuse them further instead. Senator Corey Booker has labeled the system of women in prison phenomenon as “survivor of sexual trauma to prison pipeline” (Leah, 2017). When digging into the recidivism rates of women we must shed light on the oppressive sexual trauma many of these women have faced.

Structural Oppression

Marxist feminist theory apprises that gender inequalities and oppression are the result of capitalism (Crossman, 2017). Where gender oppression deals with individual abuse of power, and gender inequality deals solely with inequalities of gender, structural oppression is based in economics. It is in this school of thought that barriers for economic growth are set in place. Many of the barriers can't easily be seen because they are unspoken rules. For example, there are no polices or laws that legally establish redlining, i.e., discriminatory practices that designate where different racial groups live, shop, bank

etc., in creating black and white communities; however, one can clearly see the division of neighborhoods based on race.

Structural oppression theories look at the barriers that are placed on race, age, class, ethnicity and gender. The barriers placed on women in re-entry keep them from being able to have any type of upward mobility on the stratification ladder. Structural oppression can be seen throughout the incarceration and re-entry process for women. Barriers to gainful employment keep many in this population from any type of upward mobility. Once released, they are placed in a system that is almost destined to recreate the same experience: going in and out of prison.

When explaining social-stratification I use the illustration of a house with two floors, an upstairs, a downstairs, and a pointed roof. The bottom floor houses the working class, the second floor houses the middle class, and the pointed roof in the shape of a triangle houses the upper class. The further up, the less populated. When explaining the placement of felons in the stratification house analogy, I refer to the basement. It is in the basement that individuals are not seen, heard or talked about. It is in the basement that the door is not only shut, but for many the door is locked. The door is locked to housing, employment and the opportunity to even live life on the first floor (lower class). Women in re-entry have found the opportunities of upward mobility to be almost nonexistent. It is for this reason that structural oppression will be used for this research to identify where women are being locked out of opportunities for upward mobility.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Qualitative Design

The purpose of this study was to learn about what women in re-entry face daily. In order to achieve this, I used a qualitative semi-structured interview method that included in-depth individual interviews and focus-group interviews. These methods allowed the participants to express themselves on their own terms. Ten women participated in the individual interviews, and two women participated in the focus group interview. Due to previous studies that identified a high percentage of transitioning women having sexual trauma, the individual interviews were conducted by a woman from the University of Kentucky, so that the women would feel more comfortable in sharing their experiences. Studies have shown women will be more open to talk to other women if they are interviewed by other women (Bozelko, 2018). The topics were introduced, and the participants spoke about their experiences and their feelings regarding the topics. The topics focused on early childhood experiences and family life, incarceration experiences and experiences during their reentry process. The women spoke about these topics on their own terms, so that they could explain what they went through in ways that were most meaningful to them.

All the women in this study were formerly incarcerated women living in Lexington, Kentucky. They were all over the age of 18. Although this project was not about race, it was important that the participant population was representative, including black and white women.

Research Process: Overview

The research participants volunteered after being made aware of the study by the Lexington Rescue Mission. The interviews and focus group session took place at the Lexington Rescue Mission. The interviews were conducted by Paige Adkins, a student from the University of Kentucky Sociology Department. The in-depth interviews were conducted on three different days and voice recorded. Unfortunately, the first interview was not audio recorded because of a technical problem with the recorder. The interviewer took copious notes during the interview, so that they could be used for analysis.

The focus group was conducted in a conference room at the Lexington Rescue Mission. I facilitated the focus group session. There were 7 women that were invited to participate, but only 2 showed up to be interviewed. The focus group focused on general experiences that women face in reentry, while the interviews investigated the personal lives of the women.

Research Process: In Depth

The research process was broken down into two sessions. The first session was the individual interview session. After participants were selected for the interviews, they chose a date and time to meet the investigators. The women were asked to participate by the Lexington Rescue Mission, through the Mission's "Breaking Chains" program. The women were selected based on the first ten that accepted the invitation to participate. The interviews did not need to be random for this project. The objective was to find women that met the set criteria, and then have them talk about what they have experienced.

The individual interviews were conducted by Paige Adkins, a (woman) from the College of Arts and Sciences Department of Sociology at the University of Kentucky. She was trained by Dr. Tony Love, a sociology professor at the University of Kentucky. She met with the respective participants in an office space at the Lexington Rescue Mission. The interviews were recorded on a voice recorder.

Originally, I considered using a thematic analysis approach to build upon questions from one interview to another. However, in order to keep the interviews consistent, I encouraged the research participants to express their individual experiences based on the same questions in each interview. There were no formal interview questions for the individual interviews. Instead of questions, there were topics that were put forth in order to avoid influencing the interviewees' answers. The topics that were covered in the sessions were: programming, family support, employment, accountability support, community support and support from the faith community. The research questions were answered as the women discussed their experiences. The interviews were audio recorded, so that the researcher could focus on conducting the interview. According to Bernard (1988), a semi-structured interview allows the informant the freedom to express their views in their own terms.

Before the interviews, the participants were briefed on what they were being asked to do. I went over the IRB approved consent form. The consent forms were signed, and the researcher and research participants were left alone to proceed with the interview. The interviews lasted between 45-90 minutes. The women received \$25 for their participation in the individual interviews.

The topics were presented to each participant individually, and they were encouraged to express themselves in their own words. All the participants were asked about their childhood experiences, what their lives looked like before incarceration, during incarceration and how life had been since being released.

I conducted the focus group session. I chose to conduct the focus group because it wasn't designed to investigate the intimate details of the lives of the women. There were seven invited but two participated. The focus group session started by going over the consent form. The two women that participated had both participated in the individual interviews. When everything was signed, I began the focus group by asking about their viewpoints on the different topics. The topics selected for the focus group were created to uncover the general experiences that women face in re-entry. As the topics were presented, the women were given time to discuss their experiences pertaining to each one.

The focus group topics were slightly more structured than they had been for the individual interviews. It was important not to create questions to discourage participants from speaking their mind in their own words. The topics were formed from the in-depth interview data. The topics discussed were as follows: 1. Prison Programs: Did you complete any programs while in prison or upon release?; 2. Family support: Did you have any family support during your time in prison or release from incarceration?; 3. What were your experience(s) dealing with employment and or education upon your release?; 4. Do you have anyone that holds you accountable?; and 5. How has the faith community supported you during the re-entry process?

It is important to note that during the focus group session, I tried not to show my personal emotions, even as I heard horrific stories of how the women were treated at some of the prison facilities. I did not want to influence the answers the women were giving.

Data Management

The individual interviews were stored on an audio recorder. The recorder was given to me by the interviewer directly after the interviews. I stored them in a safe. The interviews were kept in the safe until they were transcribed. Once transcribed, the audio recordings were destroyed via burning. The transcribed information was kept on a secure computer. No identifiers were used. This information was kept on a computer, secured through a password.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. Originally, I had thought to use a thematic approach to structure the questions, but I decided against this because of the potential for changing the interviews significantly from the first interviews to the last. Thematic analysis builds upon previous responses to questions, by stopping after a few interviews to look for themes to build questions for the next round of interviews. This had the potential of confusing the data, so I chose not to use that approach.

However, I did use thematic analysis to better understand the data throughout the interview process. For example, I started to notice that all the women in the interviews stated that they had absent fathers. I noticed this in about the eighth or ninth interview.

This was a phenomenon that I had not even thought about while originally developing research objectives. This was a qualitative study; however, when analyzing the data, I set everything up as if it was a quantitative study, so that I could more effectively look for themes. I created charts and lists, such as how many of the participants were surrounded by drugs in their youth, how many were sexually abused, how many were seeing someone for mental disorders and how many did not have fathers in their lives. This gave me a sense of how the interviewees' stories wove together to form one narrative. It is the heart of this project to give women a voice.

Chapter 4: Research Findings

Individual Interviews

The individual interview session was conducted by Paige Adkin a sociology student at the University of Kentucky. The objectives of this research project are to look at the pre-incarceration, incarceration and post-incarceration experiences of 10 women. Listed below is a list of research objectives.

Research Objective 1: Describe the Pre-incarceration Experiences of Women in Re-entry.

Research objectives sought to describe the lives of the women in their early childhood to see if there was a phenomenon in their lives that led to incarceration. In the individual interviews, the women shared their personal stories and there were a few things that stood out. The first thing I examined was the incarceration history of parents. Five of the participants had incarcerated parents. Studies have shown that having an incarcerated parent increases the likelihood of the child to commit delinquent acts (Novero, Loper and Warren, 2011). It is important to understand the importance of a missing parent on a child's development.

In one of the interviews, the participant described her father as if he was a superhero. She admired the gang that he had been affiliated with. Although he was not around (he was incarcerated), she wore this as a badge of honor:

“My father was an original Hell’s Angel. He didn’t take no shit”. She had this same sense of pride when she talked about her own lifestyle of crime: “I started selling drugs when I was 12; I was a boss living in my own trailer”.

It was clear through the interview this was a defense mechanism. Throughout the interview process, she talked about needing someone to talk to. It was clear that this participant’s view towards the criminal lifestyle was heavily influenced by the parents in or rather not in her life.

There was another woman who talked about seeing her mother deal with mental illness:

I was raised mostly by my grandmother. My dad was incarcerated, and my mother would go months of going crazy because she did not take her meds. I hated all of this because I was pretty good in basketball and nobody came to see me. Everybody would have family come around after the game but me. I ended up saying “f” it because nobody cared.

Three out of 10 women said they were physically abused. The participants that did speak about physical abuse were asked to define physical abuse in their own terms. Four of the ten women considered themselves to be emotionally abused. In fact, all the women in the study could have easily been labeled by professionals as having been emotionally abused, but I wanted to keep the theme of this study and allow the women to speak of their experiences via their own perspectives. Sexual abuse was prevalent with the participants. Nine of the ten women suffered from sexual trauma. Only one of the nine sexually abused individuals was not physically penetrated. The one who was not

sexually penetrated stated she, along with her siblings, was frequently flashed by her father:

We would be sitting in front of the TV or playing mind games and when he came around, he would flash us. This caused me to have depression. Growing up, I tried to commit suicide a few times when I was little. I was the only white kid in my neighborhood. They would always pick on me. This kept my depression going.

Molestations started for many of the women at very early ages. This participant's molestation started at eight years old.

I started being molested by mother's boyfriends when I was eight years old. The molestations didn't stop until I was kicked out by Mother at the age of fourteen. My grandma ended up saving my life... I don't go by my birth name.

This participant's molestation started at age ten.

I started being molested by my stepfather at the age of ten. This went on until I was twelve. I started using drugs when I was twelve and by the age of thirteen, I was hooked. I have been dealing with addiction issues since I was thirteen.

This participant's molestation started at age nine:

I was molested by my mother between the ages of nine-twelve. I never pressed charges on her because that is my mother. I forgave her and still forgive her. Overall, I had a good childhood. My mother spoiled me.

Some of the women were molested by multiple people:

I was molested by four different people... the first molestations started when I was 5 years old. My aunts' brother, my aunt's son's father... my aunt did not believe me when I told her... My sister walked in on me being molested. I later found out the same thing was happening to her.

There was one woman that stated she was not sexually abused. This woman was in a relationship with a thirty-three-year-old man when she was sixteen. I made a judgement call to place her in the sexually abused group. The reason that I considered not placing her in this group was this study is to represent the women's experiences in their own words. It is my observation that this participant was abused and did not recognize it.

In her words she describes her relationship:

When I was sixteen, I dated a guy who was thirty-three. He used to hit me a lot. He became violent one day held me hostage and he ended up killing my three-month-old baby. I was 16 when all this happened.

The ages of these molestations started as early as five years old and as late as sixteen. Five out of the ten women were molested at the ages of ten years of age or younger. I point this out because many of the molestations started when the participants were in elementary school. This validates the importance of programs that address sexual trauma in elementary schools.

Five of the participants had drug or alcohol addicted parents. Seven of the participants were surrounded by drugs as children. I want to point out that these participants were surrounded by drugs in their youth; this was is not the same as parental drug usage.

All ten of the women in this study had absent fathers. Five of the women had absent mothers. It is important to note that the women with absent mothers did not have either parent in their lives. When both parents were missing in the participants lives, incarceration and drug usage was the stated cause. Researchers have found that incarcerated individuals with both parents incarcerated, were more negatively impacted than other inmates (Novero, et. al). Three of the women had spent some time in foster care during their childhood, seven of the participants admitted that they suffered from mental health issues, and four of the seven stated they suffered from mental health issues and have been treated by medication and/or counseling. All the women stated that they grew up in poverty. One woman stated that she idolized the criminal lifestyle as a child. Nine of the participants were introduced to drugs before the age of eighteen. All ten of the women admitted to using drugs at some point in their lives. Many of the women used the same words, "I used drugs to cope". This was a common theme throughout the entire project.

Research Objective 2: Describe How Strain Provides a Framework for Understanding Deviance and Criminal Activity for Women Before and After Incarceration

Robert K. Merton's Strain Theory states that it is the stress or strain to live up to societal norms that pushes people to a life of crime and deviance (Bernard, 1987). When I first analyzed the experiences of these women, I started to assert that strain started when the women reentered society and tried to live up to societal norms. I was asked by Dr. Tony Love, one of my thesis committee members, about how fatherhood is tied to strain

theory. After deeper observation, I observed how strain was present early in the lives of these women, due to the fact there was no father present. It is a societal norm to have a two-parent home. These women started out without a father to protect them. Some of the women stated that they don't even know who their father is.

Strain theory indicates that experiences directly impact the reason why individuals commit crimes. Some of the crimes the women committed were robberies, drug usage and distribution, prostitution and homicide. While looking at the pre- and post-incarceration of the women, the strain or stress was most evident in the re-entry process. It was during the reentry process, when the women started to take strides to live up to societal norms, that they most experienced the most barriers.

It was during the re-entry process that the women were the most focused on staying out of jail or prison, and it was during this time that they felt the odds were stacked up against them when looking for housing, employment and trying to reunify with their children. Accomplishing all of these seemed impossible for many of them. In fact, all but one woman faced housing issues. All the mothers in this study were not in contact with their children. Seven of the participants have had a difficult time gaining employment: "nobody is willing to give me a chance;" "I know that my record will hinder me from getting a job so I will just stay right where I am at." Each one of the barriers presents difficulties which have a ripple effect. This effect can further strain the women who are trying to adjust to societal norms in their new societal situation.

Research Objective 3: Describe the Gender Specific Needs of Women in Re-entry

All women in this study discussed the sex abuse that occurs in jails and prisons. The women described the sexual abuse they have seen and endured at the hands of fellow inmates and staff. They recommended that better safety measures be executed in facilities. Sober living homes and transitional housing were also reported to have significant levels of sexual abuse. The participants recommended trauma-informed care. The women throughout this study talked about how the facilities did not show any concern about the trauma women have endured.

The participants stated they needed more hands-on help. This expression was repeated in both the individual interviews and in the focus group session. The women suggested accountability by a woman is a necessity for women to succeed. When asked about the necessity of other women to be the accountability partners, the women talked about their distrust for men. One participant stressed the need to have someone that is going to not take it easy on her: "I need someone that is going to give it to me raw and uncut. Someone who will get in my business and understands addiction."

Housing was the biggest concern for the women. Many of them stated they felt that affordable housing was an impossible goal:

I am just going from house to house right now. Seems like I can't never save enough to move out on my own. If it wasn't for my accountability partners, I would have given up a long time ago. I am grateful to have friends that allow me to stay with them. I just want my own so I can walk freely through my own...

Another participant discussed the impossible task of finding an apartment and how she felt that the application fee was a scam.

Nobody will give me a chance; it seems like everything is set up for me to fail;”
“They ask for money just for an application, it seems like the application fees are just there to take my money. They take my money and then tell me they can’t accept me because of my record. I think they are just trying to make money off the application process.

Research Objective 4: Describe the Wages of Women in Re-entry

In both the individual sessions and the focus group session, the women talked about how they were making, at most, a little more than a dollar over minimum wage. The jobs that these women held were at restaurants, dry cleaners, grocery stores and they worked as house cleaners. The wages were low for the women in this study. Men returning home from prison can find employment with better paying jobs with moving companies, construction companies and factories.. There was one woman who was working two jobs, one of which was a temporary job at UPS for \$14 an hour. The pay-scale at such jobs is important because applying for apartments or rental properties is contingent on how much an individual makes. One woman remarked: “Everywhere I go they are turning me down telling me I don’t make enough.” The low wages for women in re-entry create a ceiling that is difficult to break through. The need for access to better paying jobs for these women is essential for them to succeed.

Research Objective 5: Describe How a Criminal Record Creates a Barrier for Both Housing and Employment

Nine out of ten of the women in this study had trouble finding adequate housing upon release. The only woman who did not have trouble with housing was the only married participant. Additionally, all but 3 of the women had trouble finding employment once released. Two of the women who did not have employment issues were disabled. The disabled participants relied on monthly disability checks for income. The non-disabled participant who stated that she did not have problems with employment was again the married participant. Her husband's employment granted her this opportunity. All the women with barriers to employment attributed this to their criminal record.

Research Objective 6: Describe How Sexual Trauma Is Prevalent with women who have been incarcerated

Sexual abuse was prevalent in the lives of the women in this study. Sexual abuse started as early as five years old and as late as sixteen years old for these women. The details of these traumatic events are gruesome. The women were molested by family members: grandparents, uncles, family friends and even mothers. There was one woman whose mother would sell her to her boyfriends for money and drugs. This started for her at the age of 8. Surprisingly, there were women who went through all of this, and they still stated that their childhood was good.

Through this study a phenomenon stood out that I did not expect. All the women in this study did not have a father in their lives. Fathers are typically those who are

considered protectors. The one woman who stated her father would come around, also talked about her dad flashing her and her siblings.

Sexual abuse was prevalent throughout the lives of most of the women in this study. Childhood sexual abuse carried over to adult sexual abuse. The sexual abuse by officers in the jail was discussed as if it was normal. Sexual abuse in transitional living homes by staff was also indicated. The women talked about being propositioned for sex regularly in the housing situations they lived in.

I can't walk to the store without someone looking staring at me thinking I am trying to hustle. I can't sit outside on the porch without someone asking me for sex. It happens daily in my neighborhood. I don't know what to do. It feels like I'm trapped.

Throughout this study women have used words such as “stuck”, “impossible task”, “hopeless situation” and as the participant stated in the previous quote “trapped”. Women in re-entry many times feel as if the road ahead is too difficult to follow. It is important that women are given encouragement to complete the journey. As stated earlier by one of the participants “We need people that understand addiction”. I believe this participant wants the help of people that understand the day to day struggles women face in re-entry. I did not know how much of a task it was for women to walk to the store in high crime neighborhoods until this participant talked about it. Again, this study is being done to shed light on what women in re-entry go through in order to better serve this population.

Research Objective 7: Describe How Childhood Exposure to Criminal Activity Increases the Likelihood for Incarceration as an Adult

There were seven women that were exposed to criminal activity in the home as children. Access to criminal activity as a youth increases the likelihood they will specialize in money-oriented crimes (Brezina, 2017). Many of the women in this study knew how to locate drugs, prostitution, and other deviant acts when they were in their youth. “In certain neighborhoods, for instance, strained youth have access to illegal markets and exposure to experienced criminals (criminal “role models”)”. One participant describes how she was selling drugs at an early age.

I started selling drugs at the age of 12. It was around that age when I had my own trailer to sell drugs out of.... My dad was my hero he was one of the original Hell’s Angel’s. Although he wasn’t around, nobody messed with me because they knew he didn’t play.

Some of the women were in gangs. They were brought into this lifestyle by older family members and friends already familiar with selling drugs. All the women in the study used drugs in their youth.

I grew up in Detroit. There were always hustlers around having all types of hustles. I knew as a shorty (child) that I was going to hustle when I got older. I knew everyone that was hustling in my neighborhood. It was not a big deal for me to start selling drugs when I did. Because everyone was doing it.

All the participants in this study talked about having some form of exposure to the criminal lifestyle before the age of eighteen. There were different levels of exposure from

marijuana to gang involvement. It is important to note that any exposure increases the likelihood of incarceration.

Research Objective 8: Describe How the Neighborhood that the Women Return to Increases Stress and the Likelihood of Re-traumatization and Re-incarceration

Housing was a huge issue for all but one of the women that returned home from prison. The only places the women had to return to were places where they were surrounded by the same lifestyle that led them to incarceration. The neighborhoods these women went to were set up for re-traumatization. Fighting addiction in a drug-infested neighborhood seemed like an impossible barrier for many of the women. Some of the participants talked about how when they would have a bad day, they had urges to use. On many of these bad days they experienced being rejected from housing, and employment opportunities and barriers to seeing their children.

The neighborhoods the women must go to are not fit for raising children. The mothers in this study expressed how hard it is to find a good paying job. The concern is they feel they will not find employment with wages that help them to regain custody of their children. This causes stress to the women trying to make a change. Some women have expressed how they feel hopeless about trying to change their living situation.

I can't save anything, everything I have goes towards paying for something. You must have a determined mind and God on your side in order to make it. It is all a big set up to go back. Where I live at it is surrounded by drugs everywhere. I can't sit on the porch without someone asking me if I need some drugs or asking me for sex. I can't walk to the store without someone pulling over as if I am on the stroll. Sometimes when my money is low, I do feel like just doing it to make some fast cash.

It is important to investigate the housing environment women in re-entry are placed into. Placing these women into the environments they are trying to get out of does not seem helpful.

Research Objectives 9: What are the Motivators for Women in Re-entry

Eight of the ten participants enthusiastically stated that God was their biggest motivator. Five of the women said their biggest motivators were their children. In the focus group session, the two women stated trying to be better people was their biggest motivator. These participants did not have children, so they found intrinsic motivation a huge factor:

I don't have any kids. The motivation I have is from inside me. I feel like I have so much to give to the world. I don't know what that is right now, but I believe it is just giving back in some way.

The women in the focus group stated that God was their biggest motivator. They mentioned their feelings of purpose to help others, and how that came from them and not from an outside influence.

Research Objective 10: Describe How Women in Re-entry Have a Lack of Trust for Those in Position to Help Them

Six of the ten participants stated they had good experiences with finding help during the re-entry process. Ironically, all the women, including those that had positive experiences stated they had trust issues with individuals and organizations offering them help. Some of the participants spoke about how the re-entry programs are “corrupt and they are only looking for money”. Many of the women talked about sexual advances and

activities throughout the incarceration and re-entry process. The distrust for many started when they were young children, when the adults who were supposed to be protecting them were the ones who violated them. This lack of trust, of authority figures has been felt throughout their lives. Many of them find it extremely hard to start trusting now.

For real I don't ask anybody for any help because I don't have the time to try and figure out if they are genuine or not. I just cannot seem to bring myself to ask anyone for help.

The distrust these women have for organizations and individuals offering help is deeply entrenched. Again, many have been abused by the ones who were supposed to be there to help them.

Research Objective 11: Describe How Mental Illness is Prevalent for Women in Re-entry

Seven of the participants in this study stated that they suffer from mental health issues. Four of the seven have or are in counseling or taking medications for their conditions. Some of the women described their drug usage as a means to cope with the trauma they have experienced. Many of the women in this study are survivors of multiple adverse situations. A longitudinal study of functioning adults, who are survivors of child abuse, found that exposure to multiple adversities was associated with fewer years of education, higher levels of anxiety and depression symptoms, and increased arrests in adulthood (Horan and Widom, 2015). In this study, nine of the ten women were sexually abused as children (between five-sixteen years old), All had had an absent father, five of

the ten had had an absent mother, and seven women stated they had mental issues (four of whom were seeing a professional or taking medication).

The women repeatedly stated they had issues related to trauma and mental adversity, but they did not know where to go for help. As previously stated, many of the participants did not trust any program available to them. I believe all the programs available have a level of significance. Whether the program is related to housing, clothing, or employment. However, connecting with mental health professionals is of utmost importance. Not seeking help when dealing with mental issues can be detrimental. Due to the lack of trust, there is an increased likelihood that some of the participants have undiagnosed illnesses. One participant talks about knowing she needs help and not knowing how to reach out for it.

I know I need to see someone; I just don't know where to go. I don't know of any programs or where to go... I just lay in the bed most days. Everyone says there is something wrong. I just don't know. I just don't know.

This participant did not know where to go to seek help and was dealing with her depression alone. The homicide she was convicted of was accidental, causing the death of her child. The other women did not seek help because of lack of trust. This participant did not know where to go. She stated numerous times throughout the interview that she needed help.

Focus Group

The women in the individual interview sessions were able to break down their experiences in their own words. The focus group session was used to allow the women to

speaking about re-entry collectively as a group. This session was not seeking personal narratives. The questions that follow are those that were used for the focus group session.

1. Prison Programs

- **What are some of the programs you have completed while in prison or upon release from prison or jail?**

Re-entry programs help individuals prepare for their re-entry back into society. The women in the focus group described their experience with programming during the re-entry process.

There wasn't any program available in the prison where I was. I did not know of any programs that were available upon my release.

The other participant mentioned that drug court was the only program available.

I would not have made it without Drug Court. Having people, I can call on that went through addiction helps me out a lot, they get it.

- **What is something that you have learned through these programs that other women could learn from to help them?**

When asked if there was something from drug court that she learned that could help others in the process, she stated she could not answer that right now.

I can't answer that right now, I am just starting drug court and I can't really say what works and doesn't work. I believe that most people are in it for the wrong reasons. There are some that get it tho'. Some of them have gone through addictions and know what the deal is. Some are just there for a check and not to help people. It is easy to see who gets it and who don't. They are just now starting to have things in drug court for women to do... It used to be that we would see the guys going everywhere. We would be looking like where you all going?

This participant said she could not answer this question right now. However, her response was very insightful. She spoke about the importance of having support from drug court mentors and staff who understood what she was going through. She stated numerous times throughout the interview that staff, who had similar backgrounds, made a difference in her re-entry journey.

2. Family and other support:

- **Do you have any family support? If so, please explain.**
- **Community Support?**
- **Other support sources? -**

The positive support from the family is important in the re-entry process. When asked about the support from the spouse or partner, one woman was married and had support when she returned. Her support seemed to have been very helpful. Her husband was able to maintain paying the bills and housing. She immediately had a place to stay, which made it possible for her to slowly go through the re-entry process.

When I came home from prison, I didn't want to leave the house. The whole time I was in prison I said that when I get out, I was going to get in my bed and not never ever come out. I just wanted to climb up under a rock or something. I didn't have to worry about a job for a while because my husband kept up everything. I just didn't want to do nothing. I didn't want a job for a while because I thought that someone would know my story. I was going through depression and I didn't know of anyone to talk to. My family would come around and worry about me because all I did was lay around.

The significance of this experience is this participant had a lot of trauma during her incarceration and throughout her re-entry process. Her husband's support for her throughout this process allowed her to slowly work through the re-entry process. The other women in this study did not have the time to slowly work through the re-entry process. Once released they had to immediately look for housing and employment.

Both participants in the focus group stated they had siblings to help them in the re-entry process. Family support seemed to have tapered off once the participants showed independence. However, both talked about how much they need their families' support now more than ever.

Both women stated that there was not a lot of support from the community. This sentiment was stated throughout the interviews and the focus group session. One of the women stated that she did get words of encouragement from social media. She stated that someone was always pushing her or congratulating her on the internet.

3. Employment/Education:

- **What are some challenges that you have faced pertaining to employment and education?**
- **What are some challenges that you faced due to wages?**

Both women in the focus group session found adequate employment a challenge. One of the participants felt comfortable working a \$9/hr. job. She stated that she was afraid of rejection.

I am afraid of rejection and rejection will lead me back into addiction. I knew of other girls that went out for better paying jobs and got rejected. I can't stand to be rejected. That is why I stay in my own lane and just stick with the job I have.

This participant discussed throughout the study how she was rejected for housing and programs. When she talked about staying at the \$9/hr. job I asked her was there a link between rejection and not wanting to try for better employment or pay? That is when she talked about rejection pulling her back into addiction.

The other woman in the focus group session only wanted to do house cleaning jobs because she was paranoid that someone would know about her previous conviction.

Her case was a highly publicized vehicular homicide:

I could tell that everyone is talking about me behind my back. I had a job...and the girls at the job was always gossiping behind my back. That is why I am glad working where I'm at. I clean and don't have to talk to nobody. I get to just be by myself and not worry about anybody passing judgments on me.

The highest wage of any of the participants was \$14/hr. This job was a temporary job, so she was trying to save and make the most of it.

4. Housing:

- **What are some challenges that you may have faced as it pertains to housing?**
- **What are some suggestions regarding housing that you would share with someone that is starting out in their reentry journey?**

Both women had housing upon release, but the woman in the transitional home was having trouble finding her own place.

I have been denied everywhere that I applied to for an apartment, mainly because I have recently been released from prison. The transitional home where I was staying was shut down because of mishandling of funds that left about two dozen girls in the street. Once I left the transitional home, I was worried because I didn't have a place to go. An old friend of mine let me come and stay with him. I help the best I can, but it is hard to save so that I can move out and get my own.

The married participant talked about how her husband maintained the home until her release:

I have always had a roof over my head since I have been home. I struggle, lord knows I struggle, but I have always had a roof over my head. One thing I can say is that my husband did maintain the house.

Housing is one of the main objectives for individuals being released from incarceration. Both participants stated having a roof over their head was not a problem. Their explanations were vastly different. One participant had housing because her husband maintained everything while she was away. The other participant's explanation of always having a roof over head was having access to a transitional home and having

friends allow her to stay for a while. During the focus group discussion this participant stated that the transitional house was shut down, and then she and other women searched for housing together.

5. Accountability:

- **Have you had people in your life (e.g., mentors, counselors) who you have agreed either formally or informally to be accountable to about your decisions and behavior during your re-entry process? If so, please explain.**
- **What decisions, challenges, concerns, and behaviors are you being held accountable for by mentors, etc.?**

There was one participant who had an accountability partner. She had a worker from drug court, a former addict herself that stayed in contact with her. This was the only accountability partner identified:

I have a sponsor from drug court. She is always there for me. She is not afraid to go hard on me. She gives it to me raw and un-cut. She always seems to find words of encouragement in some of my worst days. When I have a bad day and I think about using or doing something stupid I call her. She is never judgmental. She gets it.

Throughout this study the participants talked about the importance of having people throughout the re-entry process they can trust. This participant talked very highly of the drug court program because she had a mentor who she could trust. Because of the trust she had with her mentor, the participant allowed and appreciated the mentor's straightforward approach.

6. Faith

- **How has the faith community supported you through the re-entry process?**

Church and Christ were mentioned many times throughout the focus group. One participant mentioned Jesus in response to every question. The other participant in the focus group session talked about the difference in having a relationship and just going to church:

When I was growing up, we would go to church just to go to church you know. While I was locked up, I started to hear about a relationship with God. That was all new to me. Now I know the difference. I know I would not make it one day without the man upstairs. I talk to him the first thing when I get up in the morning. I would not have made it this far; I'm telling you without him.

Faith was very important to both women in the focus group session. Both women in this session stated that it was because of their re-entry and incarceration experiences that their faith in Jesus grew. Both women stated they would not have survived this experience without their faith.

This participant also talked about her experience in the transitional home. She talked in detail about how she was always re-traumatized by being in this home:

I don't know if anyone told you this. But the lady that ran the house was making the girls sleep with her and her husband. I'm telling you she ain't right. If it wasn't for me having a relationship, I mean my own personal relationship with God, I would not do church.

Re-traumatization experiences occurred throughout this participant's re-entry process. The proposition for sex from someone in a space she thought was safe, reinforced the notion that no one is to be trusted.

One participant found employment cleaning her church. She stated that she often goes there and sits for solitude. She started going to this church because she was shunned by the church she attended prior to her incarceration:

The church I belong to now has been good to me. I work there part time cleaning. They have been there for me. The church that I belong to during all this mess, they became judgmental. Can you believe that they even had me shunned and even called my current church to have me shunned there as well. I tell you they ain't right. My current church allows me to come and go anytime of the day I please, I have a key. Sometimes I go there and just sit.

Having a faith connection was important to both participants in the focus group session. Both had negative experiences with institutions of faith. However, both participants found it important to push through their negative experiences and maintain their faith in Jesus. Both participants stated they would not have made it without their faith.

Summary

The cry that I heard over and over throughout this research process was, help! The women in this study talked about their lack of trust for people or organizations, even those claiming to help them. How can we blame them? Many of the participants in this study were abused before the age of ten. Children are the most vulnerable at this age. It is around this age when children depend on adults to feed them, clothe them and show them love. Instead, during this period of their lives, these women were betrayed by the ones who were supposed to protect them. This is most evident in the lack of a father figure in

the lives of the women. Many lacked even basic protection or help in their young lives. Therefore, they became guarded and unable to be vulnerable.

Many of the women talked about how, when they were kids, they tried to report the abuse, but nobody listened. In addition, they talked about distrust for the court system: “They are only in it for the money. They are not trying to help.” They talked about how they distrusted law enforcement: “I ain’t going to the police for anything they only want to lock me up.” They talked about distrust for transitional housing: “They have been taking our money and not paying their bills... we got kicked out because they didn’t pay their bills;”. The lady that oversaw the transitional house was forcing some of the ladies to have sex with her and her husband... “She is a pastor!!!”

The distrust these women have for re-entry programs is understandable. It was created through multiple negative encounters. Encounters that led to physical, sexual and emotional abuse at the hands of those responsible for helping them. The betrayal of trust throughout the lives of these women has made them doubt any person or program claiming they are there to help.

The addictions many of the women experience are a manifestation of trying to cope with these past hurts and feelings of hopelessness that these encounters have left. This was proven in a study conducted in Texas prisons regarding women inmates who had suffered sexual trauma during their childhood (McClellan et.al, 1997). Almost all the women in the McClellan study discussed feelings of hopelessness in everything, except in their relationships with Christ.

The addictions many of the women experience are often the ways they cope with what they have gone through. In a study conducted in Texas prisons, researchers found that women who have faced childhood sexual trauma use drugs to cope with their experiences (McClellan et.al, 1997). There are similarities between the McClellan study and this research project. In both studies almost all the women with issues of addiction talked about Christ being their only hope.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

This study was shaped by Robert K. Merton's strain theory in tandem with frames from feminist theory. Strain theory looks at how society influences crime and deviance (Agnew, 1992). Previous research supports strain theory's main point: societal norms and the barriers to achieve them are what lead to crime and deviance (Agnew, 1992; Bernard, 1987; Messner and Rossenfield, 2013). This study, which looked at the pre- and post-incarceration history of women in re-entry from prison, uncovered similar findings to previous research that have used strain theory. The women in this project all showed strain in their lives that led to a pathway of deviant and criminal behaviors. For example, in the early childhood all but one of the women were sexually traumatized. This led many of them to try and figure out how to cope. Many of the women stated this to be the reason for their drug usage.

Self-esteem issues were prominent throughout this study. Many of the women admitted to selling their bodies for sex and needing to use drugs to get over what they had just done.

Regarding Gender Differences of Women in Re-entry

Little research has been conducted on women that go through the re-entry process (Swavola, Riley and Subramanian, 2016). This research project's goal was to give a voice to women going through this experience. This project did not focus totally on gender differences between men and women in re-entry. The goal of this project was to give a microphone to the women. I believe a comparative analysis of both women and men

would be needed to conduct a thorough study on gender difference in terms of experience in re-entry.

However, in this project, the findings were alarming enough to be mentioned. The jobs that the women had in this study show gender discrimination. The jobs that the women had were waitressing, working as grocery store clerks and cleaning houses. None of the jobs involved heavy lifting. It is my belief that the gender roles imposed on women create barriers to employment in construction and jobs that are considered more masculine and higher paying. The limited employment opportunities for women creates barriers to climbing up the stratification ladder.

Another difference that was noticed was all the mothers in this study did not have contact with their children. Studies have shown that mothers in re-entry are judged more harshly than their male counterparts as it pertains to parenthood (Travis and Waul, 2003). The mothers in this study talked about their fears for their children. Because of their own personal experiences with sexual abuse, the women talked about how their biggest fear is the well-being of their children. This worry was described by a few participants as very depressing and leading to increased anxiety.

Regarding Gender Inequalities with Women in Re-entry

Gender inequality is very similar to gender differences. Gender difference simply identifies the differences between genders. For example, men typically are physically stronger than women. This is gender difference. An example of gender inequality would

be if someone hires a man over a woman because men are stereotypically stronger than women.

We asked about the women's wages in the focus group to see what women in re-entry were making. The highest paying job that anyone had in this study was \$9/hr., apart from one participant's temporary position. There was one woman that was paid under the table for jobs such as cleaning a few houses and a church. The women have found that not having adequate employment has made it difficult to move out of financial hardship and reach for future goals.

Regarding Gender Oppression

Gender oppression is different from both gender difference and gender inequality. It is an active attack against an individual or a group. Gender Oppression was seen in this project in employment, housing, wages, reunification with children, sexual trauma while incarcerated, and sexual trauma once released.

Not only were women constantly denied employment opportunities due to their criminal history, but they were subjects of gender oppression and inequality. There is not any equivalent wage compensation for women compared to men. Due to the low wages, the women feel they are in an impossible position regarding upward mobility, they are often stuck in a cycle of poverty. If they don't have any opportunity for better wages, then this can lead to housing issues. They can only live where they can afford. This is housing oppression. The few places that gave the women a chance for housing were in high crime areas, where drugs and prostitution were prevalent. A recent

study on women returning home from jail found that such unstable housing can lead to predation, relapse and re-incarceration (Ward, 2017).

All five mothers in this study did not have custody of their children. Four of the mothers dealt with mental illness. Three of these mothers were fighting addiction. There were a lot of women that talked about being abused and witnessing abuse while they were incarcerated. These are other forms of gender oppression. There were a few women in this study that were staying in the same women's transitional facility. They talked about being forced to have sex with the director and her husband. Abuse of authority of another based on their sex is the definition of gender oppression. These women were physically abused in their childhood and many into their adulthood.

Gender oppression is prevalent among women in the re-entry process. It is through researching what women go through that we will be able to call out the abusers from childhood to adulthood. Looking at the abusers and experiences is not enough. We must allow women to speak about the issues they have faced in their own words. Giving them the microphone to speak empowers them.

Gender oppression is an abuse of power. You cannot oppress if you do not have the power to do so. Giving women the opportunity to express themselves empowers them to fight abusive power. When I hear that many of the women witnessed sexual abuse all through their lives, whether it was pre-incarceration, during incarceration or post-incarceration, it speaks volumes about the gender oppression they faced throughout their lives. Gender oppression does not simply oppress these women; it took the ambitions of

young girls and changed their life trajectories. These women dreamed as little girls of doing great things. They did not want to be felons, have their children taken away, become addicted to drugs, fall victim to being molested and raped, and looked down on by society.

And while some programs like drug court have done substantial work in communities across the country, these are not the sole arbiters for successful re-entry for these women. It is my recommendation that investments be made to have re-entry courts, not just drug courts. Understanding drugs without a re-entry directive is setting many people, especially women, up for a cycle in and out of prison. Re-entry courts are now being used in different communities around the country (McGrath, 2012). Re-entry courts have proven to be especially important for women in re-entry and the reunification between mothers and their children.

Regarding Structural Oppression

Unlike gender oppression, structural oppression can sometimes be difficult to see. We can easily see gender differences between men and women. Gender inequalities can easily be seen through identifying traditional roles and how those roles are applied to individuals, positively or negatively. We can also argue that gender oppression is easily seen by simply looking at abuse. The abuser is usually the one that has the power and they somehow use their power to physically oppress the one perceived to not have the same authority.

Structural oppression manifests primarily as economic oppression. It can be invisible to many who are not using a structural oppression lens to view oppression and inequality. Throughout this project, we have identified where women are placed in a seemingly no-win cycle. One of the most common complaints about incarceration was the lack of programs. There were a couple of participants who stated they needed help navigating their first few days of being in jail and prison. They did not know what they needed to do or who to talk to about preparing for release.

There was a woman in this study who had a homicide conviction. She was heckled, bullied and threatened while she was in prison due to the nature of her case. “I didn’t know who to talk to, it seemed like everybody was against me”. The women complained in the focus group sessions that there were a lot of interventions for men in similar situations, but there were not any for women. In prison, there were programs for men to get time off their sentence if they were completed. In Kentucky prisons and jails, there is even the “Inside-Outside Dad” program. This program allows the men to earn time off their sentence upon completion. There is not an equivalent program that allows women to earn time off their sentence and prove they are fit parents.

Once released, structural oppression of women is prevalent in employment opportunities. I recommend stakeholders invest into transitional homes away from high crime ridden areas. Trauma-informed care should be a priority for any organization that assists women in re-entry. In this study, all but one of the women were impacted by sexual trauma. Other studies have found similar results: 99% of the women in this study were sexually abused (Magee et al., 2005); and 98% of the women in this study were

sexually traumatized (Green et al., 2005). Because sexual trauma is so prevalent with women in re-entry, I believe re-entry programs should have regular checks to make sure their programs are safe.

Women have fought to have their voices heard for years. The Suffrage Movement was one of the hardest fought battles to crack the glass ceiling. They fought to have their voices heard through the right to vote and hold office. Women have had to fight for everything, and the fight continues. Women in the re-entry process are now in need of an advocate. The women in this study talked about not trying for positions because they felt that they would not get a chance. They stated that they were fine with a \$9/hr. job. “I am good where I am at because being rejected will push me back to my addiction”. This is structural oppression at its worst. Michelle Alexander talked about the systematic oppression that exists in re-entry and the prison industrial complex (Alexander, 2012). Her book *The New Jim Crow* focused on race and incarceration, primarily she focused on African American men. However, Michelle Alexander encouraged researchers to investigate the systematic oppression of women within the prison system. I continue that call for more to be done to understand and to protect women in the oppressive system of incarceration and re-entry.

Recommendations for Re-entry Programs

Re-entry programs should look at the safety measures that are in place in their facilities, curricula and staff. Safety is a huge piece that has been missing in the lives of these women. For these women to feel safe or change their thinking about trust

they must feel their safety needs are being taken seriously. Reentry programs cannot be afraid to tackle the issues surrounding sexual trauma, and there should be an emphasis on trauma-informed care. This allows the setup of offices and meeting spaces to be trauma-informed, so that when women come to a facility, they are not re-traumatized by the set-up of meeting spaces. It is important to ask women how safe they feel on a regular basis. Men and women have different perspectives on safety. When a woman is asked what she fears when walking down a dark alley, she may say that she is afraid of being raped. This is a different answer than most men would give.

The women in this study seemed to be beaten down emotionally. Having rules, guidelines, and barriers are important. However, there should be a lot of positive reinforcements in the lives of these women. There should be an emphasis on creating a path for mothers to gain access to and/or custody of their children. Lastly, the re-entry programs must be judgment free zones. This study has illuminated what women in re-entry go through, and they don't need judgment; they need the love and care of providers. They need the protection that they never had.

Recommendations for Future Research

If this study was to be repeated, it is recommended that the women be recruited from different agencies. I am forever grateful for the Lexington Rescue Mission for their recruitment efforts; I just feel solely using the Rescue Mission for recruitment may have swayed the focus from re-entry in general to the population of the Rescue Mission in

particular. The women that came through this program are women that were already looking for help with housing, employment, clothing etc.

It should also be noted that using the Rescue Mission facility could have swayed some of the participants' answers. For instance, many of the women vehemently apologized when they used a curse word. Some of the women during interviews talked about their faith even to the point of crying. I often wondered if some of the answers were given because of the faith-based setting of the Rescue Mission. If I were to conduct this study again, I would avoid interviews in faith-based settings, in order to avoid any undue influencing.

Paige Adkins did a great job with the individual interviews. She admitted that she had a hard time understanding the language that some of the individuals used. She stated that this made her feel a little awkward. Some of the opportunities for digging deeper into the answers the women gave may have been lost due to this barrier. However, her perspectives on what she saw and heard through the interviews brought a fresh perspective to this project.

I would recommend that future research investigate the relationships or marital status of those released. If I were to conduct this study again, I would put a huge emphasis on relationships. For instance, there was only one married woman in this study. The re-entry issues that most of the women in this study had, did not affect her. For example, she was the only participant who had stable housing when released.

The welfare of the children was another theme that came out of this study. All the mothers in this study did not have custody of their children. A study solely for mothers in re-entry is desperately needed. The mothers talked about the fear of something happening to their children. I believe the traumatic experiences of the mothers enhanced the fear of the children's safety. I recommend programs that work with women in re-entry, make it a point to connect mothers to their children. I say this with the understanding that all cases are different. The mothers in this study with addiction issues talked about how much they loved their children. They also talked about how hard the addiction battle is. Again, I understand the difficulty of trying to keep the children safe.

Limitations

The lead investigator was me, Julius Johnson, a male graduate student at the University of Kentucky. To make the women feel comfortable about speaking about the intimate details of their stories, I chose to use female interviewers to conduct the interview sessions. The interviewer chosen was Paige Adkins a sociology student from the University of Kentucky. She did an excellent job. However, this left a gap between me and the research participants during the interviews. Even though she had limited experience with the population of research participants in the study, I feel Paige Adkins was the right person selected to conduct the interviews.

Time was of the essence during this study. There were many obstacles that delayed the finishing of this project. These delays discouraged some of the participants who wanted to participate in the beginning. Many of them chose not to go through with

the interviews, which caused us to have to re-launch the recruiting process. There were other limitations that delayed the project as well. For instance, I planned a focus group with invitations to ten women and eighteen showed up to participate. While finishing the focus group session, I was put through what is called a Qualitative Internal Review (QIR). This is basically an audit of your work. I was told by one of the auditors that I was only the second non-medical student to go through this process in the history of the University of Kentucky. This resulted in a five-month delay in the research.

Another limitation was space. The interviews and focus group were conducted in the Lexington Rescue Mission's House of Hope. Although both men and women are served on this property, this property is used to house men. This had the potential to re-traumatize some women. In addition, the Lexington Rescue Mission is a faith-based organization. The women cursed a few times and constantly stated that they were sorry. During the sessions the women talked heavily about God and Christ. I do not know if the building influenced any of the answers. Using a setting that was as neutral as possible in all aspects would have been ideal.

Words from Paige Adkins

Paige Adkins, the interviewer, helped to make this project a success. She worked to help communicate the narrative of the stories that she heard. During the time she was conducting the interviews, she was inspired to change her major. She has now graduated and is working in Cincinnati, Ohio, with individuals with similar backgrounds to the women in the interviews. I wanted to give her space in this thesis to speak:

Our justice system is supposed to be designed to “rehabilitate” offenders. The justice system fails in many ways, but especially in that once someone is charged with a crime and they have a record, they have a life sentence of social inequality. Contrary to men, women generally face more and different struggles unique to their gender. It’s one thing to hear stories in the media or read about experiences of those who have been incarcerated or have been involved in the criminal justice system. It was entirely another experience, for me, to hear the personal stories of previously incarcerated women firsthand. One of my biggest takeaways is that a major root cause of the criminal records of these women stems back to trauma in their upbringing that went ignored or untreated. Ultimately, the psychological damage from the trauma led most of these women down a bad path resulting in crime, addiction, and further victimization.

From their family background and education to drug addiction and trauma, ten women shared essentially a timeline of their lives with me. There was anger. There were tears. There was fear. The emotion in each interview was raw. These are real people who have experienced unimaginable trauma. They lost faith in the justice system and authority figures. They also lost faith in humanity. In a non-research perspective, this project gave a chance for overlooked women to not only have a voice, but to have their voice genuinely heard. These women are not used to having someone wanting to hear their life stories or opinions, because they are overlooked

on a day to day basis. When given this opportunity, most of these women left the room feeling more empowered and given hope that there are people who care in the world. These women don't want pity. They don't want handouts. They want to be given a chance to have a life, a chance that most of them were robbed of before they were even charged with a crime and incarcerated. (Paige Adkins)

Against all odds

I want to complete this thesis by highlighting three women who fought against all the odds that were stacked up against them. They have faced the same battles discussed throughout this study. It is my hope these words find the ears of someone going through the re-entry process.

Amanda Hall, Vashaun Mosby, and Deanna Hoskins share their experiences of how they persevered and are now proving statistics wrong. Their stories not only relate to the women, but offer hope no matter what the odds look like. Amanda Hall is one of the leading forces for re-entry with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Kentucky. Vashaun Mosby is an entrepreneur who is teaching others with a criminal background how to build wealth and start their own businesses. Deanna Hoskins shared her experience of how she became the leader of the Justice Leadership USA (JLUSA), which includes working in President Obama's Administration.

Amanda Hall

Though the sentence for my crime was 5 years, it seems as though a life sentence was imposed. Upon re-entry I had difficulty with housing, healthcare, obtaining an ID, employment, voting...the list went on and on. Yet, somehow, I overcame. Community members and formerly incarcerated people lifted me up. Folks with empathy rented me a house, when all other landlords shut the door on me. After incarceration my health suffered, yet I finally found a provider who was caring and compassionate. As a woman suffering from substance use disorder, I found a recovery program and was able to address my trauma. I can't help but acknowledge how fortunate I was to have these supports around me.

Now my life's work is spent on helping other individuals who are incarcerated or formerly incarcerated. I am a living example that successful re-entry changes lives. I am now a college graduate with a master's degree, a mother, a person in recovery, a Kentucky Colonel, a recipient of "Kentucky's Most Compassionate", and "Best of Louisville". Consequently, I am not an exception. So many formerly incarcerated women deserve these accolades and are some of the best people that I know. They have suffered severe trauma, harm and hurt throughout their lives and have survived. My hope is that we lift these women, support them, and listen to them. All they need is support, and we must come together to provide that.

Vashaun Mosby

19 years ago, I faced 25 years in prison. I was only 19 years old. I had no prior record. My mother was a preacher. My father was a Master Sergeant in the Marine Corps. But the justice system saw me as another name and another number. I was a walking statistic. The odds were stacked against me.

At 20 years old, I gave birth to my first child. I gave birth again at 22. Now at 22 years old, I am a two-time felon with two small children. What are my options? What else can I do? I was heading to a life of welfare. I did not have any income, so I applied for welfare checks. My children received childcare contracts so I could participate in employment training programs. I had food stamps, medical cards, and Section 8. There were no other options. I applied for jobs time and time again, only to be fired once they ran my background check. I had no other recourse; I had no other options.

At 26 years old, I had my record expunged. I accepted entry-level positions. I moved to mid-level administration. I moved to Executive level administration. Before my 30th birthday, I made it to corporate America. I was determined to succeed. I worked harder than most to get the consideration. I did not have a degree. But I had a rabid-dog tenacity that propelled me into success.

In corporate America, I felt like I made it, but I was still unfulfilled. Making money is great but what lives am I impacting? I knew I was supposed to effect change.

And I started the journey. My department in corporate America was shipped overseas, so I knew it was time for me to take a leap of faith. I decided to pursue entrepreneurship.

Five years ago, I opened a publishing house and marketing firm. I wrote my story, *Behind Her Eyes*. I detailed a life of trauma to a life of triumph. I landed a deal with a nationwide bookseller. Twelve book signings and 2.5K books sold, I started making a difference. I was featured by local news stations and community organizations. I landed my first corporate partnership with FedEx Office. But still I knew I could do more.

While working in corporate America, many friends asked if I would work on their resumes and help them secure employment. Repeatedly, I succeeded. This side business turned into a full-time business. Eighteen months ago, I opened my second change staffing agency. We are an alternative staffing organization. Like conventional staffing firms, ASOs provide staffing services to employers for a fee. But we put a greater focus on the well-being of the worker than a conventional staffing firm would.

Since the launch of my agency, I have won six business pitch competitions in 6 months. I gained attention that landed me meetings with the mayor and other governmental officials. And I am now in talks in launching my 3rd microenterprise, VaShaun Nicole Technologies. We will create technology to assist my clientele into gainful employment and sustainable living.

Against all odds, I prevailed. I did not want to be a statistic. I rewrote that narrative. Now my life is a narrative that others with the same story can read and learn

from. It is not how I begun. It is how bad you are willing to work to recreate your own end.

Deanna Hoskins

I was sentenced to a term of incarceration in 1999, upon completion of that sentence I was to serve a total of five years on community supervision. In addition, the judge ordered that I remain drug free, retain custody of my children and maintain employment. What he did not state was the collateral consequences of the felony conviction that society would impose on me. Upon my release, it was easy to get custody of my children as my family stepped in so they would not have to go into foster care. My housing at the time was in a subsidized unit that the landlord allowed my family to pay the \$50 a month rent for me. Checking off all the things I was required to do I set out to seek employment only to continuously get the door slammed in my face. Prior to my conviction I was a data entry specialist working in office environments within corporations and banks. I would always receive contingent offers that would immediately be rescinded once my criminal record came back.

This went on for some time, I finally realized I had to obtain an education to outweigh the felony conviction. I immediately enrolled in a two-year liberal arts program. Not sure I could do it I took it one class at a time. I found a transitional housing program that was a mom and pop shop but had funding to hire a Case Manager full time. I then found a weekend housing manager position with a HIV/AIDS organization. I worked full time and part time and attended school in the evenings. I was away from my

children like I was during my active addiction, but I had to have my education in order to give them the life I knew they could have. I finished my Associates Degree and immediately enrolled in a bachelor's program. Again, working and going to school I finished the next two years.

At the completion, I was offered a position with the Indiana Department of Corrections as a Case Manager. Within 7 months I was promoted to the Governor's Office of Faith Based and Community Initiatives. I then enrolled in a Master of Criminal Justice. I completed in 2009 and two years later was offered a position back in my hometown as the Director of Re-entry for the Board of County Commissioners. The highest-ranking African American woman in the county. The same county I was arrested, convicted and sentenced in.

Five years into this position, I was recruited for the Obama Administration to work in DC as the Senior Policy Advisor for Re-entry and Corrections. I relocated to DC and while I was a career employee, once the administration changed, an opportunity to become the President/CEO of JLUSA was offered. JLUSA is a national organization dedicated to cutting the correctional population in half. It is founded by and operated by those most impacted by the criminal justice system. As an African American woman in a space not prepared for me, I have come to realize that just being there is revolutionary within itself.

I encourage every woman reading this to remember you are the hero you have been waiting on. Simply by your resilience and determination you are powerful and wonderfully made. You are the revolution, you are ENOUGH.

APPENDIX

Questions for the Focus Group

1. What are some of the programs you have completed while in prison or upon release from prison or jail?
 - What did you learn from these programs that helped you during the reentry process?
 - What is something that you have learned through these programs that other women could learn from to help them in their reentry journey.
2. Family:
 - Do you have any family support? If so, please explain.
 - Spousal support?
 - Children support?
 - Relative support?
 - Community Support?
 - Other support sources?
3. Employment/Education
 - What are some challenges that you have overcome pertaining to employment?
 - What are some persisting challenges?
 - What are some challenges that you overcame due to wages?
 - Are there persisting challenges pertaining to wages?
4. Housing:
 - What are some challenges that you may have faced as it pertains to housing?
 - What are some suggestions regarding housing that you would share with someone that is starting out in their reentry process?
5. Accountability:
 - Have you had people in your life (mentors, counselors... who you have agreed (formally or informally) to be accountable to about your decisions and your behavior during your reentry process? If so, please explain.
 - What decisions, challenges, concerns, and behaviors are you being held accountable for by mentors etc.?
6. Faith Community:
 - Are you connected to a faith community? If so, how has it impacted your re-entry process?

APPENDIX

Questions for the Focus Group

7. What are some of the programs you have completed while in prison or upon release from prison or jail?
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 - Do you have any family support? If so, please explain.
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 - Relative support?
 - Community Support?
 - Other support sources?
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 - What are some challenges that you have overcome pertaining to employment?
 - What are some persisting challenges?
 - What are some challenges that you overcame due to wages?
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 - What decisions, challenges, concerns, and behaviors are you being held accountable for by mentors etc.?
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 - Are you connected to a faith community? If so, how has it impacted your re-entry process?

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Vita

1. Place of Birth: Lexington, Ky
2. Educational Institutions:
 - University of Phoenix
 - Associate in Human Service Management (2012)
 - University of Kentucky
 - B.A in Sociology (2014)
 - University of Kentucky
3. Professional Positions Held:
 - Lexington Rescue Mission Director of Reentry Services
4. Julius Johnson