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The Impact of Incarceration for Women who have Children: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

Since the 1980's the number of women in prison has increased at a rate of 50 percent higher than men (The Sentencing Project). Current research focuses on the impact of having an incarcerated parent, and how this affects children. Qualitative research done from the mother's experience of parenting from behind bars is limited. This topic has been overlooked during a time of increased incarceration of women who are the primary caregivers of their children. Incarcerated women face marginalization, stigma, and shame, especially when having to parent children on the outside.

Introduction

Jails are currently experiencing a rise in the incarceration of women more than any other correctional population, and since 1970 has increased 14-fold from under 8,000 to nearly 110,000 (Swavola, Riley, & Subramanian, 2016). In the United States, 1.3 million children have mothers who are incarcerated. Two thirds of these children are under 18 years of age, approximately 15% are infants that are younger than six weeks, and between 5-10% of women who are entering the correctional system are pregnant (Braithwaite, Treadwell & Arriola, 2008). Research demonstrates that imprisonment can be permanently injurious to their role as mothers (Barnes & Stringer, 2014). Children are often placed with relatives allowing the mothers to have some ability to stay in touch with their children; however, in other cases children are sent to foster care; and once there, parental rights can be terminated (Barnes & Stringer, 2014). Contrary to belief, many women desire to resume or assume mothering responsibilities during and following their imprisonment (Barnes & Stringer, 2014).

Question

To address this gap in the literature, this phenomenological study will investigate the lived experience of incarcerated mothers to gain a deeper understanding of what it means to be separated from their child due to incarceration. .

Methods

Phenomenology

- Phenomenology is understanding how individuals make sense of an experience. Phenomenology was used in this study because it will find the meaning of being incarcerated and a mother (Creswell, 2007).

Participants

- Participants are currently incarcerated at Cumberland County Jail.
- Participants are woman who have a child they're parenting from behind bars.
- Seven accepted participation.

Feminist Theory

- Utilizing Feminist Theory in this study helps view this phenomena of responses to women's offending that appear to be gender neutral or gender blind and how women's needs and differences are not considered while in jail. Particularly because their needs while in the criminal justice system are different and greater than those of men due to their primary role as caretaker to their children (Barnes & Stringer, 2014).

Themes and Essences

Theme One: My children pay the price (Figure 1)

"Well, this time have been different. I was incarcerated before when I just had my son. It was only for a couple of months, and it wasn't a huge thing. This time it's been a lot different. My son has stayed back in third grade. He lives with his dad now. That's a whole change for him. I'm not around. He stayed back. He got a new sister out of the deal, which was very surprising. I don't know, it's been a struggle. (Participate 7).

Theme Two: Feeling Helpless

• Lost of control over children's lives

"It's really hard from every aspect of it to be honest with you." The not knowing what's going on is the hardest for me. Not knowing what's happening with my kids. Not being able to help them is the worst. To have my hands completely tired because I'm that person who takes care of everybody. I work all the time. I'm the person who supports the family in every way. For me to not be able to help anybody is like the worst for me. I can barely help myself in here let alone anybody lese you know?" (Participant 4)

Theme Three: Importance of Family Support

• Staying connected with children through communication

"Other than that, the communication has been nice. I write to them as often as I can." (participant 3)

• Stability for Children

" Yeah, I am his world, it kind of evens itself out, makes it easier. My mom is really good with him. He is still in the same house that he was born in. His life hasn't changed much, except me just being gone. His life is still kind of the same. Yes, yep, my life is kind of on hold, but his keeps going, which is good." (Participant 5)

Theme Four: Hope for the Future

"I feel like if I can stop now at 42 and break this cycle, no matter what I am going to rise up, I'm strong, I'm resilient, I'm a survivor, and I can do this shit. Never before did I rely on anything or trust anybody, just now at this ripe age I am getting to, I know what I don't want, I am still figuring out what I do, do I know what makes me happy completely, my children, that is one thing I know. I want to see them grow up. it sucks the system some times."(Participant 3).

Theme Five: Shame

"Yes. I don't think no child will ever just accept it. The fact that the matter is like on the internet now, you can't hide anything and her friends and – it's embarrassing." (Participant 6)

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Results

This research study explored women's experience and understanding of being a mother to children while incarcerated. With the current increase in the incarceration of women and the limited research on the experiences it creates for a mother I on this topic. The results were a mix of women, who arwanted to conduct my own research e mothers, that are currently incarcerated at Cumberland County Jail and their lived experiences that helped develop a description of the shared themes within the data.

Five major themes resulted from the data analysis, and included: My children pay the price; Feeling Helpless, with a sub theme of, Lost control over children's lives; Importance of Family support, with a sub theme of, staying connected with children through communication, and stability for children; Hope for the Future; and Shame.

Significant Statement	Meaning Unit
My son has missed out on a lot. He had to stay back last year. He's had difficult with his friends at school social-wise because he just shuts down. (P. 7, pg.3)	I am not there to help my son with school and he is failing because of it.
Yes, it's been a big strain on it because your kids want to be able to look up to you like, they want to be like you but in this case, its not going to happen. (P. 6, pg.2)	My daughter's and my relationship will forever be tarnished because I can never erase that I went to jail.
Yea, oh yeah, its not easy. I do it though, I deal with it, he deals with it. Both of his parents are incarcerated, so it is kind of hard. (P. 5, pg. 2)	My son is growing up without a mother and father while we are in jail.
I miss my family more than anything now, I do, I miss them and I would give anything if I can go back and my kids didn't have to do this. That's the hardest thing for me, is knowing that they're going through this is – that's the worst (P. 4, pg. 6-7)	I have caused a lot of pain for my children.
We have had some phone calls, you know they have, they have to go through their emotional pain from what I have caused them. And they have ever right to be angry and every right to lash out on me and every right to feel, well mom, you're going to leave us again, you went to jail here, you went to prison here. (P. 3, pg.6)	My children don't trust me to stay out of jail and let me know that when I talk to them

Figure 1. Theme 1

Discussion

Previous studies have found that women's maternal identity changed because of incarceration and that the separation from their children is identified as the main difficulty in prison (Shamai & Kochal, 2008). In addition, studies have shown that in order to cope with the pain of being away from their children they used avoidance strategies (Shamai & Kochal, 2008). My study found that separation from their children is described as difficult and painful. However, while women felt a since of helplessness and a loss of control over their children's lives, they were determined to maintain a connection with their children through phone conversations and writing letters. My study found that women were less likely to have visits from their children as a way to avoid their children seeing them in that environment. Participant four said "The hardest part was having them come to visit. I never wanted them to come see me, I never allowed my children to come see me."

Lastly, prior research has suggested that the incarceration of a mother can have negative consequences on their relationship with their children. My study found that mother's who are incarcerated may express a sense of helplessness, however they are still mothers who have hope a future with their children.