Spring 2017

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

Chelsea White

University of Southern Maine

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/thinking_matters

Part of the Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons, and the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation
White, Chelsea, "The Impact of Incarceration for Women who have Children: A Phenomenological Study" (2017). Thinking Matters Symposium Archive. 88.
https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/thinking_matters/88

This Poster Session is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at USM Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Thinking Matters Symposium Archive by an authorized administrator of USM Digital Commons. For more information, please contact jessica.c.hovey@maine.edu.
The Impact of Incarceration for Women who have Children: A Phenomenological Study

Chelsea White University of Southern Maine. Mentor: Professor Gerstenblatt of University of Southern Maine

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, therefore the purpose of this study is to explore and understand the challenges during a time of incarcerated women of 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 (Brathwaite, Treadwell &Ariola, 2008). Research demonstrates that incarceration 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 after 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 are currently incarcerated at Cumberland County Jail.
• Participants are women 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).

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 on this topic. The results were a mix of women, who wanted to conduct our own research e mothers, that are currently incarcerated at Cumberland County Jail and their lived experiences 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.

Themes and Essences

Theme One: My children pay the price (Figure 1)
“...I wish I could redo my whole life. I wish I could have had a choice...I wish I could have a choice, one day, having to make that choice, I wish I could have gone back.” (Participant 1).”

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 tied 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 else 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. I talk to them as often as I can. I call them as often as I can. Both of these parents are incarcerated, so it is kind of hard. They sort of stay up late when I wake up, and I stay up late when they wake up. They have to make sure they don’t get caught.” (Participant 3).

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 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 it’s — it’s embarrassing.” (Participant 6)

Significant Statement
• We lost three kids to my son. I had to stay back last year. He’s still difficult with the friends at school social role because he just shut down. (Participant 7)

Meaning Unit
• My daughter and her relationship will forever be terminated because I can never erase that I went to jail.
• It’s a shame that my child is not on track. He’s not the child he should be. I want to be there for him. I want to comfort him. I want to be there for him. (Participant 6)
• Have caused a lot of pain for my children.
• My children don’t like he staying away from me and I don’t even know if they like me.

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 (Shamal & 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 (Shamal & Kochal, 2008). My study found that separation from their children is described as difficult and painful. However, while women felt a sense 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.


References

Acknowledgements
I want to thank Paula Swavola, Chelsea White University of Southern Maine. Mentor: Professor Gerstenblatt of University of Southern Maine.

Figure 1. Theme 1