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The Lived Experience of Motherhood after Prison: A Qualitative Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT

Despite the increasing number of women experiencing incarceration internationally, their experiences of motherhood after prison rarely studied. This review aims to explore and synthesize current research on the nature of the lived experience of motherhood after imprisonment. A qualitative synthesis review of English language-based articles published before January 2020 was used. 14 peer-reviewed qualitative studies were identified. The findings indicate that the post-release was a time when mothers re-claim their mothering role but faced significant challenges without sufficient support systems. It was also a time of reflection on the impact that the context of incarceration had on parenting roles and relationships with their children. The review found that we have limited understanding of the mothers' current experiences of motherhood post-release. The reports are also insufficient to capture the mothers' voice in different contexts. Further research is therefore required to explore the motherhood experience after release in greater depth and richness.

KEYWORDS

Incarceration; motherhood; prison; qualitative systematic review; reentry

INTRODUCTION

Motherhood is a group identity in which the shared action of mothering is performed (Kawash, 2011). From a psychoanalytic perspective, motherhood is defined in terms of the innate behavior of being a mother and attachment to the child (Holmes, 2006), whereas sociologists explore mothers' actual experiences of child rearing and the effect that culture and society have on this (Lareau, 2003). Motherhood is hereby explained and experienced within different contexts, and these contexts/perspectives construct and restrain the mothering experience (Lareau, 2003). In patriarchal societies, motherhood is considered the ultimate way for women to find physical and emotional fulfillment (Holmes, 2006; Skott, 2016). Deviating from these norms of motherhood results in social stigmatization and the categorization of the women as "bad" mothers (Akujobi, 2011). Such women are condemned for prioritizing other things at the expense of maternal responsibilities.

Incarceration increases the likelihood of the aforementioned stigma (Aiello & McQueeney, 2016; Garcia, 2016). Incarceration is among the many adversities and conditions in life that can

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negatively impact motherhood and maternal responsibilities (Kawash, 2011). The effect of incarceration is strongly felt within the family, especially since most incarcerated mothers are the primary care givers (Artz & Rotmann, 2015). This impact extends to the reentry process as the mother makes the transition from incarceration back into society and adjusts to life outside of prison and a crime free lifestyle (Laub & Sampson, 2003). Reentry is a complex process with multiple challenges for incarcerated individuals. Many of them do not have the opportunity for professional development and therefore have limited educational and job skills. They also have difficulty finding employment and often lack proper housing (Shinkfield & Graffam, 2009). Some have unresolved substance misuse, mental health and trauma issues, have little outside family and community support (*ibid.*) and are stigmatized because of their criminal record (Aiello & McQueeney, 2016; Pager, 2003).

Although all individuals with incarceration experiences encounter challenges during the reentry process (Shinkfield & Graffam, 2009), the experience of formerly incarcerated mothers is unique due to the additional demand of reuniting with their children and fulfilling their maternal role (Gadsden, 2003). Incarceration means that the mother is often separated from her children, which can create a barrier in reestablishing relationships with the children, the wider family unit and society when she is released (Cnaan et al., 2008, Kawash, 2011). The quality of these relationships can impact the success of the transition process and the likelihood of remaining crime-free (Mignon & Ransford, 2012). The effective transition of formerly incarcerated mothers into the community also promotes healthy child development and wellbeing. When parents go through a stressful reentry process, children become highly vulnerable, and their parents' situation is a key factor in children's resilience and wellbeing (Philbrick et al., 2014). In other words, the rights of the child may be at risk if the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents as caregivers are compromised during this time (UNCRC, 1989).

The voice of mothers who have experienced incarceration is often unacknowledged and absent from discourses around what motherhood in general means and should be (Holmes, 2006). This is concerning given the rise in incarceration rate of mothers in many countries (World Prison Brief Report, 2017) and the importance of service user voice in achieving best practice and support for mothers leaving prison. When mothers who are incarcerated are consulted, they express concern about the transition/reentry phase of their lives and fear discrimination and inadequate support systems after release (Aiello & McQueeney, 2016; Gobena & Hean, 2019). There is no clear overview of their experiences, particularly the experience of motherhood when reentry has actually taken place, as current reviews of the empirical evidence focus on the experience of mothering while incarcerated (Murray et al., 2009; Shaw et al., 2015; Stanton et al., 2016). To our knowledge, there is no synthesis of formerly incarcerated mothers' experiences of motherhood after release. This review therefore aims to synthesize and reflect on the existing evidence or literature that captures the lived experience of motherhood after incarcerated mothers leave prison in an international context, to highlight what is currently known and where the gaps in knowledge are.

METHODS

The review was conducted by staff with expertise in social work and the experiences of women in prison (EB), prison research and review methods (SH), vulnerability and review methods (VH), and social work and child protection (IS). The review follows the qualitative synthesis review procedure employed by Thomas and Harden (2008), a verified method of synthesizing qualitative research to accomplish higher order thematic categories in a transparent way. The Population, Phenomena of Interest and Context (PICo) model was adopted to develop the review question, search strategy and inclusion criteria (Riesenberg & Justice, 2014). The review question was

Table 1. Search strategy.

(Formerly incarcerated OR ex-convict OR post-incarceration OR post imprisonment OR "release* from prison" OR "release* from jail" OR incarcerate* OR imprison* OR prison* OR jail* OR "correctional facility*" OR "correctional institution*" OR parole OR desistance)
 AND
 ("Mother child relationship" OR mother child relationship OR mothers OR mother OR motherhood OR maternal OR motherhood experience*)
 AND
 (Qualitative OR "lived experience*" OR perceptions OR interview).

Table 2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion criteria

- Population: Formerly Incarcerated mothers
- Phenomenon of Interest: Motherhood
- Context: Motherhood experience after prison in all international contexts
- Peer-reviewed and published articles
- Paper published in the English language
- Published before January 2020
- Studies with a qualitative approach or (mixed methods with a qualitative component that met the above-mentioned inclusion criteria)

Exclusion criteria

- Quantitative designs
 - Participants: incarcerated women who are not mothers, incarcerated mothers who are still in prison, the experiences of incarcerated men and the experiences of children of incarcerated individuals.
 - Articles not peer reviewed, letters, personal narratives, editorials, book chapters, and theses
 - Mixed method without clear qualitative description.
 - Articles not in the English language
-

therefore: What are formerly incarcerated mothers lived experience of motherhood after leaving prison? This review question informed the search of online databases below.

Search Strategy

With help from a librarian, seven databases (Criminology database, PsychINFO, MEDLINE, CINAHL, ProQuest, Scopus, Academic Search Premier) were selected for the search. These databases were searched from their first publication to January 2020. To identify further papers not picked up in this search, a hand search of Research Gate, Academia and reference lists of articles already selected for inclusion was conducted. To connect the key words Boolean terms were used (see Table 1).

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria and Inter-Rater Reliability Checks

The search resulted in 410 papers, 397 papers remaining after the removal of duplicates. The titles and abstracts of the 397 papers retrieved were reviewed by the first author (EB) based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria summarized in Table 2. All excluded papers were shared between the other members of the research team [SH, VH, IS] who evaluated these on the Table 2 criteria as an inter-rater reliability check. Disagreements were resolved through discussion among reviewers.

Original qualitative studies that provide insight about the motherhood experience of formerly incarcerated mothers were included. Only qualitative studies were included (or those mixed methods studies with a significant qualitative component). This was because these types of studies present a thick description of the formerly incarcerated mothers' lived experiences. These types of studies offer better depth of understanding of the motherhood phenomenon and are representative of the voice of formerly incarcerated mothers themselves (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Here

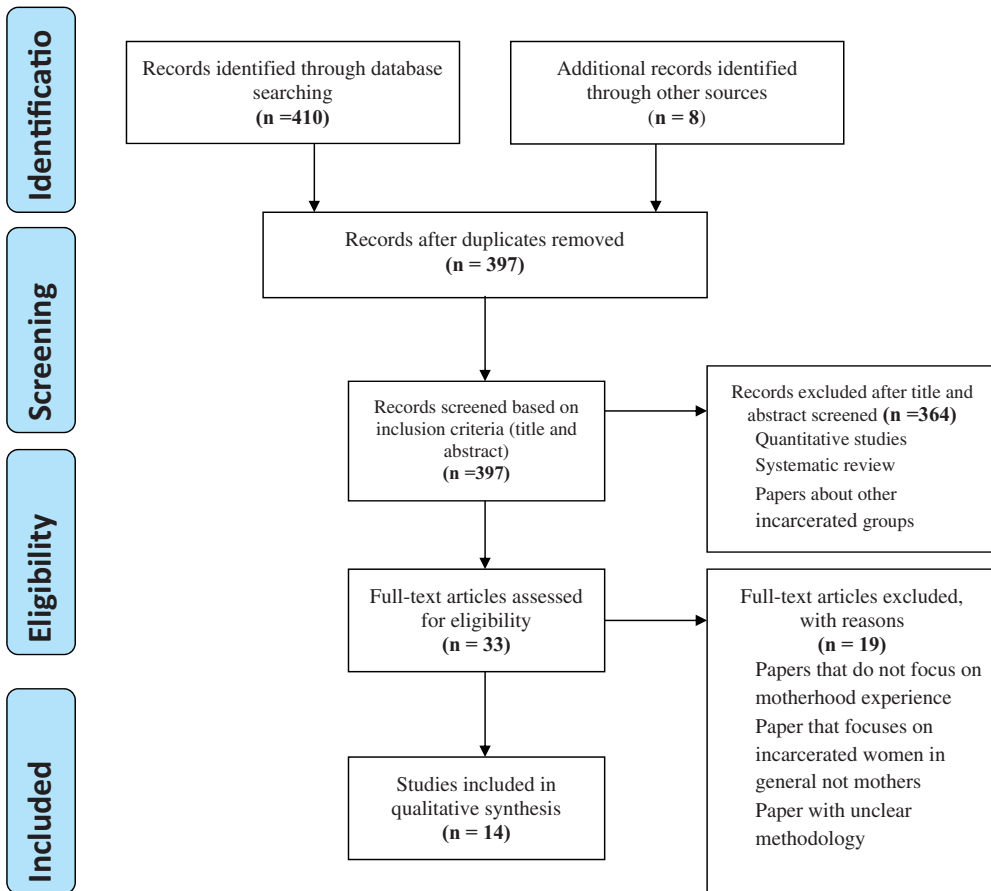


Figure 1. Flow diagram following PRISMA guidelines (Moher et al., 2009).

the lived experience is defined as the direct, first hand, positioned and immediate activities and encounters of the mother in everyday experiences (Pascal et al., 2011). This subjective reality or experience of motherhood after prison can only be captured inductively through a qualitative approach.

Based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 364 studies were excluded. The full text of the remaining 33 full text papers were read and checked based on the inclusion/exclusion criteria again. A total of 14 studies remained after this process. Of the 14 papers selected for review, 12 were qualitative research papers and 2 mixed-method studies. All studies used interviews as the main data collection method ($n = 14$). Two of the included articles reported findings from the same study, therefore limiting the review to 12 separate studies. The process of identification and inclusion of relevant studies in the review is summarized in a PRISMA Flow Diagram (Moher et al., 2009) (Figure 1).

Quality Assessment of Papers

A quality appraisal of the remaining papers was conducted. This was conducted in order to critique the standard of the available literature rather than exclude any papers within the sample. To assess the quality of the identified studies, the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme tool for qualitative research (CASP, 2018) was used. This tool has 10 key questions that include multiple areas, like participant selection strategy, ethical issues, relevance, and suitability of qualitative

method and rigor of data analysis. A numerical scale (0–10) to rank the papers based the CASP criteria were developed and this was applied to rate each paper as “very good” (8–10), “satisfactory” (5–7) and “weak” (0–4). A first reviewer [EB] critically appraised all studies. Then a second reviewer [VH] blind assessed 20% of the papers. The results of this critical appraisal are summarized in [Table 3](#). Among reviewers [EB] and [VH] there were no significant differences in overall quality appraisal or CASP rating of the included studies. No studies were found to be of weak methodological quality. Seven studies were found to be of high methodological quality and seven with satisfactory methodological quality (see [Table 3](#)).

Data Extraction

Following suggestions by Thomas and Harden (2008) all text from a paper that is labeled as “findings” or “results” were extracted. This included direct quotations. From this material, text related to motherhood and mothering activities within the results sections of each selected paper were extracted specifically. NVivo 12 was used to manage this data during the coding process and facilitate data organization and transparency of analysis.

Synthesis Process

A qualitative synthesis was employed in this review. Compared to a quantitative meta-synthesis, a qualitative synthesis allows an exploratory and inductive analysis of people’s experiences and focuses on increasing understanding of a phenomena (Ring et al., 2011). The first author [EB] engaged in a process of familiarization through reading and rereading the material extracted from the sample papers, followed by a line-by-line coding (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Similar codes were subsequently clustered together, and overlapping codes were merged. In total, 81 codes were developed. These codes were compared and contrasted for similarities and differences, and similar codes were grouped together into twelve descriptive themes. Up until this point, we had produced a synthesis, which kept very close to the original findings of the included studies. The final and third stage was the development of analytical themes (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Examining the descriptive themes in relation to the original review question and abstraction attained this. The step of “going beyond” the content of the original studies was achieved by using the descriptive themes that emerged from our inductive analysis of study findings to answer the review questions we had temporarily put to one side. Since the selected studies often had a different focus than this review, we identified commonalities, differences and themes to synthesize existing findings into a new conceptual context of motherhood experience after prison (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

This resulted in three main analytical themes. The main body of the analysis was conducted by the first reviewer [EB], but the coding and development of themes were discussed by all review team members to check the trustworthiness of the analytical process. All disagreements or inconsistencies were resolved through discussion, and all reviewers agreed the final account. A summary of the extraction, quality appraisal, general characteristics of the studies included and the synthesis process are provided in [Table 3](#).

FINDINGS

From the 14 papers the vast majority were from the USA ($n = 12$) with merely two studies from Europe (UK). There is a lack of published research from other countries and continents. The inclusion of only English-language articles may contribute to this. Most of the included studies focused on the psychological, socio-economic and relational challenges to motherhood as experienced by formerly incarcerated mothers upon their release. The review findings are organized

Table 3. Study characteristics and CASP quality rating.

No	Authors, year and country	Aim/objective	Methods (Sample, Data collection, analysis)	Key findings/themes in the paper	Limitations and CASP
1	Arditti and Few (2008), USA	To conceptualize maternal distress following incarceration and during reentry	Grounded theory study with 10 mothers either on parole or finished parole. Including African American (n = 2) & Caucasian (n = 8). Semi-structured interview/Ground theory analysis	The study found three forms of distress: Psychological distress, Relational distress and Maternal distress	Insufficient information about ethical issues and researcher relationship with participants CASP = 8/10, Very good
2	Baldwin, (2017), UK	To explore how maternal emotions and the maternal role are assembled and challenged through prison space, and more specifically, how mothers themselves assimilate this experience whilst navigating motherhood post incarceration.	Qualitative study with 20 released mothers that included diverse backgrounds. Interview Thematic analysis	Mothers' reflection of situated maternal feeling: prison space and the challenge to maternal feelings and emotions after prison. Emotion and the organization of prison time and space: reflection of post prison mothers	No consideration and discussion about the researcher's relationship with the participants. No clear description of the specific research design. CASP = 7/10, satisfactory
3	Brown and Bloom (2009), USA	To explore the emotional content and the meaning of maternal role for ex-incarcerated mother.	Mixed-method researcher with 25 mothers on parole. Semi-structured interview. No clear information of how the qualitative data analyzed	Reclaiming motherhood Parental capital Preparation for reentry and community support	Insufficient information about participants' selection, interview process and ethical issues. No clear description of the analysis. CASP = 5/10, satisfactory
4	Beichner and Rabe-hemp (2014), USA	To explore the vulnerability of incarcerated and reentering rural mothers.	Mixed method approach with 17 rural mothers. Interview Analysis process unreported.	Relational Vulnerabilities: Interpersonal Factors Relational Vulnerabilities: Intra-Psychic Factors Situational Vulnerability	Insufficient information about participants' selection, interview process and ethical issues. No rigorous description of the analysis process. Inadequate justification and description of the research design CASP = 5/10, satisfactory
5	Cooper-Sadlo et al. (2019), USA	To explore motherhood experiences before, during and after their incarceration.	Transcendental phenomenological approach with 12 ex-incarcerated mothers including African American (n = 9) & Caucasian (n = 3). In-depth interview. Moustakas's (1994), Transcendental phenomenological analysis	Experiencing motherhood Struggles of motherhood during incarceration and Motherhood after incarceration and reunification	No clear statement of the problem CASP = 9/10, very good

(continued)

Table 3. Continued.

No	Authors, year and country	Aim/objective	Methods (Sample, Data collection, analysis)	Key findings/themes in the paper	Limitations and CASP
6	Few-Demo and Arditti (2014), USA	To explore the influence that mothers' close relationships have on their reentry experience with their families.	Descriptive qualitative study with 10 incarcerated and reentry mothers including Caucasian ($n = 7$) and African American ($n = 3$). Interview. Ground theory analysis	Disempowerment due to family and intimate relationships characterized by violence, trauma, and substance abuse. The presence of ambiguous and ambivalent relationships. Unresolved loss and grief due to relationship dissolution or the death of a parent, sibling, child, or intimate partner. Stigmatization within familial relationships. Romantic relationships and womanhood norm violations. Racialised stereotypes and norm violations. Strategies for managing stigma in familial and romantic relationships. The identified three types of mother work: Collective mother work Hyper-vigilant mother work Crisis mother work	Insufficient information about ethical issues in the project. CASP = 8/10, very good
7	Gunn et al. (2018), USA	To explore how formerly incarcerated mothers with histories of substance use experience stigmas from their intimate relationships with family and romantic partners.	Grounded theory study with 30 mothers including Black ($n = 19$), White ($n = 7$) and Latina ($n = 4$) Semi-structured interview Ground theory analysis	Stigmatization within familial relationships. Romantic relationships and womanhood norm violations. Racialised stereotypes and norm violations. Strategies for managing stigma in familial and romantic relationships. The identified three types of mother work: Collective mother work Hyper-vigilant mother work Crisis mother work	CASP = 10/10, very good
8	Gurusami (2019), USA	To examine how state surveillance under post-release supervision and child welfare services shapes and constrains formerly incarcerated Black women's mothering practices.	Ethnographic study with 35 women including, Black ($n = 24$), Hispanic (2), White ($n = 3$) and Unknown ($n = 6$) Participant observation and interview. Abductive analysis	Stigmatization within familial relationships. Romantic relationships and womanhood norm violations. Racialised stereotypes and norm violations. Strategies for managing stigma in familial and romantic relationships. The identified three types of mother work: Collective mother work Hyper-vigilant mother work Crisis mother work	Insufficient information about the research design and ethical issues. Limited description and discussion about the researcher's relationship with the participants given an ethnographic study. CASP = 7/10, satisfactory
9	Hayes, (2009), USA	To explore the experience of mothering after prison.	Interpretive phenomenological study with 6 mothers including African American ($n = 1$), Hispanic ($n = 2$), Caucasian ($n = 2$) and Unidentified ($n = 1$). Interview. Thematic analysis using Max van Manen's (1990) approach to hermeneutics phenomenological reflection	Doing mothering right Family: a double-edged sword The honeymoon is over Mothering beyond the honeymoon	Inconsistent and limited information of participants. Limited information of ethical issues CASP = 8/10, very good
10	Michalsen, (2019), USA	To explore formerly incarcerated mothers' descriptions of transition moments and the effect of these moments on their criminal behavior.	Exploratory qualitative study with 100 mothers. 71% of the participants were non-Hispanic African American. In-depth interview. Exploratory data analysis	Desistance Turning points	No clear description of the analysis. No consideration and discussion about the researcher's relationship

(continued)

Table 3. Continued.

No	Authors, year and country	Aim/objective	Methods (Sample, Data collection, analysis)	Key findings/themes in the paper	Limitations and CASP
11	Michalsen, (2011), USA	Explore the relationship between attachment to children and desistance from criminal behavior.	Exploratory qualitative study with 100 mothers. 71% of the participants was non-Hispanic African American. In-depth interview. Moustakas' (1994), approach of exploratory qualitative data analysis	Why Desist? Do Children Discourage or Encourage Desistance . . . or Both? Mothering in Reentry as a Stressor	with the participants CASP = 8/10, very good The analysis process is not rigorous CASP = 8/10, very good
12	Mitchell and Davis (2019), USA	To understand black mothers' lived experience of motherhood after incarceration.	Phenomenological study with 5 Black mothers. Semi-structured interview. Thematic analysis	Black mothers' concern for their children Black mother raising their children without support Black mothers battling mental illness and addiction	Inadequate justification and description of the research design. Limited description of the analysis process No consideration and discussion about the researcher's relationship with the participants CASP = 7/10, satisfactory
13	Robison and Miller (2016), USA	To explore the experiences of mothers who are under state supervision, focusing on narratives from mothers who transitioned to a halfway house as part of their reintegration.	Grounded approach with 8 mothers on parole or probation or had recently been released including Black ($n = 4$), White ($n = 3$) and Hebrew Sicilian ($n = 1$) In-depth interviews Thematic analysis	Reimagining Good Mothering "Being There" for their children as discourse and decision Re-centering on Self as Good Mothering in the Halfway House Mothering Under State Supervision: (Non) negotiable Responsibilities Stages of motherhood	Insufficient information about participants' selection, interview process and ethical issues. Limited description of the analysis process CASP = 6/10, satisfactory Insufficient information about interview, data collection process and researcher relationship with participants.
14	Schinkel, (2019), UK	To examine the interaction between trajectories of parenthood and trajectories of desistance in order to understand how these interact over time.	A qualitative study with 29 men ($n = 16$) and women ($n = 13$) parents, all participants were White British Semi-structured Interview Thematic and narrative analysis		Insufficient information about interview, data collection process and researcher relationship with participants. Limited description of the analysis process CASP = 6/10, satisfactory

into three analytical themes. Formerly incarcerated mothers experience the post release period as a time for the following:

- *Re-claiming motherhood, a process mediated by the challenges of the transition back into society,*
- *Reflecting on the impact of the previous incarceration on their parenting and the relationship with their children,*
- *Experiencing support systems and their impact on their mothering role after leaving prison.*

There are some commonalities or overlap between the themes; however, each theme has its distinct and unique characteristics of mothers' experience of motherhood after incarceration. The order of the presented themes is not based on importance or frequency of occurrence in the paper.

Re-claiming Motherhood, a Process Mediated by the Challenges of the Transition Back into Society

Research participants highlighted that they wished to become good mothers and thus by definition well-adjusted citizens, but this was an identity that these mothers needed to negotiate with society once they were released.

I wanna be a good member of society, I wanna be a woman and a mother that I know that I need to be, and I know that I could be. Without drugs, without doing negative behaviours, and, you know, it's, it's time for me to change. (Michalsen, 2011, p. 358)

The process of re-claiming motherhood and maternal rights after prison was a challenging and lengthy process for many formerly incarcerated mothers. They stated imprisonment tarnished their identity as a "good mother" and subjected them to stigmatization. They also found themselves defined negatively by others and that their role in the family was undermined. This negative view was an essential element in their self-identity and self-esteem (Baldwin, 2017; Brown & Bloom, 2009; Gunn et al., 2018).

In ... [name of prison] ... it felt like we [the mothers] ... were basically looked on as bad mothers, actually worse than that ... mothers who didn't deserve to have kids. (Baldwin, 2017, p. 5)

Most of the formerly incarcerated mothers also had multifaceted and unresolved issues that seemed to impede them achieving the ideal of mothering and to live out this mothering ideal they had constructed post incarceration (Hayes, 2009). They mentioned a range of complex challenges after release, including substance misuse, mental health problems, situational vulnerability like unemployment and economic problems and discrimination including experiences of racism (for black mothers) (Arditti & Few, 2008; Baldwin, 2017; Beichner & Rabe-Hemp, 2014; Brown & Bloom, 2009; Few-Demo & Arditti, 2014; Mitchell & Davis, 2019).

Majority of formerly incarcerated mothers showed a strong desire to reunite and regain custody of their children. However, the unification process and custody battles were challenging and often unexpected (Arditti & Few, 2008; Cooper-Sadlo et al., 2019). For many formerly incarcerated mothers, if they won these custody battles and had their children returned to them, severe practical concerns like financial problems, housing, living arrangements and insecurity in these then became an issue (Brown & Bloom, 2009; Michalsen, 2011).

Getting my son back was mainly fears. Because I haven't had him, how was the relationship going to be between us, was I going to be a good mother, was I going to be able to take care of him financially, was I going to be able to love him the way he needs to be loved? (Michalsen, 2019, p. 948)

Despite the many challenges the formerly incarcerated mothers faced during reentry, they also showed resilience and commitment to being a better mother. In their everyday mothering role, they exhibited strong self-sacrifice and thoughtfulness and they aimed to protect their children from violence, crime and further involvement in the criminal justice system. They were also committed to educate their children so that their children could have a better life than them. Some of the formerly incarcerated mothers even gave up custody of their children to stable caregivers in order to protect them from being influenced by their own drug use. Because of the guilt they felt toward their children's suffering due to their absence, some formerly incarcerated mothers showed a strong motivation to avoid re-incarceration. The efforts involved obeying the terms of their probation, attending rehabilitation and counseling programmes regularly and making an effort to stay away from drugs (Arditti & Few, 2008; Baldwin, 2017; Beichner & Rabe-Hemp, 2014; Cooper-Sadlo et al., 2019; Few-Demo & Arditti, 2014; Gunn et al., 2018; Gurusami, 2019; Hayes, 2009; Michalsen, 2011; 2019; Mitchell & Davis, 2019; Robison & Miller, 2016; Schinkel, 2019).

Mothers Reflecting on the Impact That Their Previous Incarceration Had on Their Current Parenting and Relationship with Their Children

Being incarcerated had a significant impact on child rearing, and formerly incarcerated mothers felt that they lost influence or authority in their relationship with the child. They described how their incarceration had disrupted the whole family and negatively affected their relationships with their loved ones, especially their children. These relationships seemed to be shaped by them first leaving and then reuniting with children (Brown & Bloom, 2009; Cooper-Sadlo et al., 2019; Few-Demo & Arditti, 2014). The formerly incarcerated mothers reported that their physical absence from the home made them lose authority in disciplining, monitoring, advising, and taking responsibility over their children's life. For formerly incarcerated mothers, whose incarceration had led to long-term separation from their child, the parent child relationship had become fragmented, and the emotional bonding between them was impaired (Beichner & Rabe-Hemp, 2014; Brown & Bloom, 2009; Cooper-Sadlo et al., 2019; Few-Demo & Arditti, 2014; Hayes, 2009).

My daughter got this hatred towards me and at first it really hurt. She called my mother and said, "Can you believe my mommy didn't have nothing to do with me?" (Few-Demo & Arditti, 2014, p. 1309)

Further, formerly incarcerated mothers reported that their imprisonment had impacted their children in a negative way, which made their parenting more difficult. Some formerly incarcerated mothers said their children had deliberately emotionally distanced themselves from them, fearful of their mother's re-incarceration. They reported that their children exhibited unstable emotions of anger, hopefulness, fear, clinginess and/or withdrawal during reunification, and some of them even exhibited behavioral changes like drug addiction and criminal activities. Some formerly incarcerated mothers believed that they were responsible for their children's bad behavior because they had been a bad role model (Arditti & Few, 2008; Baldwin, 2017; Beichner & Rabe-Hemp, 2014; Brown & Bloom, 2009; Cooper-Sadlo et al., 2019; Gurusami, 2019; Hayes, 2009), as illustrated in these quotes

The worst part about my crime was that I dragged my daughter along with me. She was in the house. So she got arrested when I got arrested. So that was really hard for me to deal with. Just that I had to worry about her. She can't get a job at the airport now because of the arrest (Brown & Bloom, 2009, p. 318).

I see so much of me in her that it scares me. (Arditti & Few, 2008, p. 310)

The formerly incarcerated mothers noted how communication with children through letters, phone calls, and visits while incarcerated had strongly shaped their parenting after prison. The formerly incarcerated mothers, who had had limited or no contact with at least one of their

children during the incarceration period, struggled with a loss of the relationship upon release. Those who had frequent or regular visits had a better relationship with their children post incarceration (Baldwin, 2017; Cooper-Sadlo et al., 2019; Michalsen, 2011, 2019). One formerly incarcerated mother believed that her ability to bond with her children during her incarceration gave her the strength that she needed to accomplish change in her life after release (Beichner & Rabe-Hemp, 2014). However, the children's visits during their incarceration period tended to be bitter-sweet because of the poor handling of children's need by caregivers and the type of place and space available in relation to these visits, which left their children sad and confused (Arditti & Few, 2008; Baldwin, 2017).

I enjoy seeing them. The hardest part is seeing them walk out the door. (Arditti & Few, 2008, p. 310)

I was so upset after that first visit, she wasn't dressed in anything I'd pick, she was frightened, she looked untidy and I felt like she hated me. (Baldwin, 2017, p. 5)

Incarceration affected the mother-child relationship, and her absence was a barrier to rebuilding the relationship with children after prison. As a result, many formerly incarcerated mothers reported that reestablishing and re-claiming their status as a mother and caregiver post incarceration was a complex endeavor. The anger, resistance and distrust felt by their children, as well as those caregivers who had looked after the children during the incarceration period, and the formerly incarcerated mothers' own feeling of guilt and shame, meant that returning to a mothering role was not a smooth journey (Arditti & Few, 2008; Brown & Bloom, 2009; Cooper-Sadlo et al., 2019; Gunn et al., 2018; Gurusami, 2019; Hayes, 2009; Michalsen, 2011; Robison & Miller, 2016).

It's more than you think you're going to come home and parent ... On top of it is really harder getting out of prison and not taking a child development class and thinking you're going to raise the kid that's already been raised by somebody else. (Hayes, 2009, p. 231)

Experiencing Support Systems and Their Impact on Their Mothering Role after Leaving Prison

Formerly incarcerated mothers described their experience of formal and informal support systems available to them on release and the significance of this for their mothering role.

Formal Support

Formerly incarcerated mothers describe their experiences of formal support systems as mainly related to rehabilitation programmes, support from a variety of professionals and employment opportunities. They stated that the availability of formal support during and after prison was limited. For example, some formerly incarcerated mothers experienced psychological distress, but no systematic mental health care was available for them. Formerly incarcerated mothers' unmet mental health needs were connected to their histories of depression, current reentry challenges, and persistent and worsening depressive symptoms (Arditti & Few, 2008). They needed rehabilitation services that focus on mental health, education, training and preparing them for life after prison. They also stated their need for skills and resources, including drug rehabilitation programmes and community services that would allow them to construct healthy family environments (Beichner & Rabe-Hemp, 2014; Brown & Bloom, 2009; Cooper-Sadlo et al., 2019; Few-Demo & Arditti, 2014; Gunn et al., 2018; Michalsen, 2011; 2019; Robison & Miller, 2016).

Help us. Educate, educate, educate, educate, educate ... if I knew better, I would've done better. But now that I know better, I am doing better. And I know better because people have taught me. (Cooper-Sadlo et al., 2019, p. 98)

Most of the formerly incarcerated mothers, on release, had some contact with professionals from the child welfare, mental health as well as criminal justice systems and report having experienced mistreatment and humiliation by these professionals (Cooper-Sadlo et al., 2019). The formerly incarcerated mothers said that upon release they felt disempowered. They wished to be heard, educated, recognized and treated with dignity by the people who possessed the capacity to help them, in this case the welfare professionals. They emphasized how a friendly and simple gesture of kindness by professionals in the criminal justice system (e.g. caseworkers, judges and prison officers) made a difference in their recovery process (Baldwin, 2017; Gurusami, 2019).

Informal Support

The formerly incarcerated mothers also discussed their experiences of informal support like family support, intimate relationships and religion or faith groups and the impact of this on their reintegration process and mothering role. Most formerly incarcerated mothers had had an unstable and chaotic childhood themselves with poor family support, lack of trust, molestation and traumas. They believed that these childhood experiences had paved the way to their current mental illness, drug addiction, poor decision-making and bad mothering (Arditti & Few, 2008; Beichner & Rabe-Hemp, 2014; Cooper-Sadlo et al., 2019; Few-Demo & Arditti, 2014; Hayes, 2009; Robison & Miller, 2016).

The formerly incarcerated mothers' intimate (romantic) relationships were often characterized by abuse, violence, economic dependency and men's attempt to control their lives. Many of them stated that they have insecure relationship with their children's father and that the men were unable or reluctant to be a "good husband or father". Some formerly incarcerated mothers were stigmatized by their partners, and they described this stigma as a danger to their recovery and reentry process. Some of them described how they had started these romantic relationships for economic benefit to support themselves and their children. They described these relationships as a means to pay the bills, rent and court fines but that they did not get the emotional support they needed from an intimate partner (Arditti & Few, 2008; Baldwin, 2017; Beichner & Rabe-Hemp, 2014; Few-Demo & Arditti, 2014; Gunn et al., 2018; Michalsen, 2011; Robison & Miller, 2016).

Finally, mothers also described the positive role of faith and religious support:

Now that I'm back in church, you know, and I'm staying focused, and I'm keeping my sights on God and faith, I'm seeing things positive happening again for me in my life. Ha! You know, I'm happy, I'm at peace, I'm content, you know? I'm seeing things happening for me that I've lost. I'm stronger, you know, my spirit is stronger. (Michalsen, 2019, p. 953)

Some formerly incarcerated mothers described their spirituality and having a higher power (God) as a good informal support and contributed toward a positive lifestyle and good mothering (Cooper-Michalsen, 2011; Cooper-Sadlo et al. 2019; Michalsen, 2019; Robison & Miller, 2016).

DISCUSSION

This review of the lived experience of motherhood after prison found three main dimensions in formerly incarcerated mothers' experience of their motherhood after release. These are the challenge of re-claiming motherhood, the impact of their previous incarceration on their current parenting and relationship with their children, and finally their experience of support systems and their impact on their mothering role post-release.

Re-claiming Motherhood

Most formerly incarcerated mothers in the study had a high expectation of caring for and reuniting with their children after release; however, many of them mentioned re-claiming motherhood on

release as stressful. They also indicated that imprisonment tarnished their identity as a “good mother” and exposed them to stigma and discrimination. This negative view was an essential element in their self-identity and self-esteem, and it also affects their motherhood identities in their own eyes and those of their families (Moore, Stuewig & Tangney, 2016). Arendell (2000, p. 9) and Skott (2016) argue that mothers who deviate from the conventional or patriarchal framework of motherhood like mothers with incarceration experience are often subject to discourses of deviance about motherhood and its harsh effects. These “deviance discourses” comes from this ideological construct of motherhood that are used to target women who do not fit the standard of full-time biological motherhood. These mothers face gender bias and discrimination—that they have failed as mothers, just as women are expected to sacrifice all their wants and needs for their children. Therefore, in order to help formerly incarcerated mothers, it is necessary to move away from imposing the impossibility of patriarchal institutionalized motherhood and take a step toward a re-articulated mothering practise that understands mothers, mothering and motherhood beyond the expectations of what constitutes “good mothering” (Fiona, 2015).

In addition, formerly incarcerated mothers are often the primary caregivers of children, and they return to family situations that require them to find a living income not only for themselves but also for their children and families (Cnaan et al. 2008). Situational vulnerabilities such as housing, employment and economic problems made it very difficult for them to perform the mothering role as they expected. Despite their motivation to be good mothers and reunite with their children, these practicalities usually ended up taking precedence over reunification and building relationships with their children (Garcia, 2016; Haney, 2010). Nonetheless, for many formerly incarcerated mothers in the review, motherhood was still a key motivating factor and turning point in their efforts to reenter a better and healthy life. They showed a strong commitment and resilience to protect their children from any harm. Some of the formerly incarcerated mothers in the review even relinquish their primary caregiving role and place their children to stable caregivers to protect them from the influence of their drug use. For them, the safety and healthy development of their children becomes the priority rather than their primary caregiving role after incarceration. The concept of family resilience involves more than coping with stressful conditions. It includes the potential for personal and relational transformation and growth that can be constructed from adversity (Walsh, 2003). A crisis can be a chance to focus on what is important, and it can become an opportunity to rethink priorities (Aiello & McQueeney, 2016; Walsh, 2003).

The family resilience framework emphasizes the importance of using a strengths-based approach by enabling families and individuals to make sense of their adverse experience through an understanding of the socio-cultural context in which they function (Hawley 2000; Walsh, 2003). In order to provide a context for safety, adaptability and change, the provision of integrated care, the development of a social network and the facilitation of family and community change are crucial (Walsh, 2003). In particular, creating an environment that promotes parenting skills, finding employment and managing finances helps formerly incarcerated mothers adjust to society. Governmental and non-governmental agencies should also provide mental health and drug rehabilitation programmes during and after incarceration to help formerly incarcerated mothers fulfill their mothering roles with sober minds. Criminal justice system professionals and social workers must recognize the growing number of incarcerated women by developing relevant and coordinated programmes to empower formerly incarcerated mothers and their families after incarceration. They should also advocate and educate society about the unique needs and challenges of incarcerated mothers to combat discrimination and marginalization.

A Reflection on the Impact of Incarceration on the Mother-Child Relationship

Formerly incarcerated mothers reflect on their time in prison, and they describe a break down in emotional attachment when incarceration occurred over an extended period of time. Their observations reflect the premises of attachment theory, in which long-term cognitive, social, and

emotional difficulties are attributed to a poor parent-child relationship and the separation of the child from the mother over a long period of time (Bowlby, 1952). Maintaining or strengthening family ties during the mother's incarceration would then be central to minimizing the impact of physical absence on the mother-child relationship after incarceration. However, in-prison programs provide incarcerated mothers with little connection to their children and do not prepare mothers for what to expect when they return home; they are not designed to help incarcerated mothers think through reentry. (Aiello, 2013, 2016; Aiello & Mccorkel, 2018; Aiello & McQueeney, 2016).

A quantitative study in Australia and New Zealand (Casey-Acevedo et al., 2004) has shown that interventions that promote communication between mother and child while in prison affect recidivism rates upon release. Our review additionally suggests that improving communication is important not only when the mother is in prison, but also when she is out trying to rebuild relationships with her children. Although some of the literature in the review suggests that formerly incarcerated mothers valued frequent or regular visits with their children after release and this led to better relationships with their children after incarceration (Baldwin, 2017; Cooper-Sadlo et al. 2019; Michalsen, 2011, 2019). Some studies outside of the review criteria on incarcerated mothers' perceptions when still in prison do not always concur with this, as some suggest that face-to-face prison visits with children increase depression in incarcerated mothers and negatively affect their well-being (Houck & Loper, 2002; Poehlmann, 2005). Seeing their children in prison may be good for maintaining the relationship, but it can still be upsetting for incarcerated mothers. A balance may need to be struck between the pain of seeing their children in prison and maintaining the relationship with the child.

Therefore, the accounts of formerly incarcerated mothers of the harms of separation to their children suggest that the criminal justice system and social workers should pay attention to optimize and facilitate the mother-child relationship during and after their incarceration. This could include regular visits with their children during incarceration with child-friendly visitation spaces in prison, allowing enough time during the visit to provide education or training for incarcerated mothers on parenting skills, and facilitating cyber-visits such as video conferencing as an alternative when physical visits are not possible (Mignon & Ransford, 2012). Providing family therapy and expanding family preservation services inside and outside of prison should be one of the areas of focus in criminal justice systems. Maintaining these relationships also has benefits for the child (Cnaan et al, 2008) as the children of incarcerated individuals constitute a group of vulnerable children with special needs and attention (Philbrick et al., 2014).

Experience of Support Systems Post Release That Impact the Mothering Role

Post-release support is one of the most important aspects of successful reintegration, connecting formerly incarcerated mothers to potential opportunities and providing them with appropriate services in the community. Yet, formerly incarcerated mothers felt they lacked adequate and appropriate services both during and after incarceration. Some reported mistreatment and abuse by these professionals both inside and outside of prison.

Any insufficiencies or gaps in the care and support available to incarcerated individuals after release can contribute to recidivism and a stressful reintegration process (Wikoff et al., 2012). Healthy interactions between incarcerated individuals and professionals inside and outside of prison are critical to the success of rehabilitation and reentry programmes. Such relationships are best achieved through regular communication that enables professionals to understand the rehabilitation and reentry needs of incarcerated individuals and any difficulties they may face inside and outside prison (UNODC, 2015). This can be particularly important for formerly incarcerated mothers who suffer from a range of issues such as childcare and discrimination. To play a positive role in this process, child welfare, mental health and criminal justice professionals need to be carefully selected and provided with appropriate and ongoing training, including a gender-

sensitive approach and the concept of human rights and dignity. They should also be able to work in safe conditions and be well supported by their managers (UNODC, 2015).

Sociologists such as Lareau (2003, p. 251) argue that “social and economic resources play a key role in shaping the child-rearing process; as parents’ own social class position shifts, so do their cultural beliefs and practices in childcare’. The incarceration history of formerly incarcerated mothers and the associated economic and material difficulties such as unemployment, housing problems, and custody issues during reentry negatively shape their motherhood and parenting experience. In addition, the limited and inadequate formal support system may force incarcerated individuals to rely on informal support systems (Haney, 2010). Although further study is needed, this may be why some of the formerly incarcerated mothers in the review stated that they stayed with their abusive intimate partners to obtain financial support. They described these relationships as a means to pay the bills, rent, and court fines (Arditti & Few, 2008; Baldwin, 2017; Beichner & Rabe-hemp, 2014; Few-Demo & Arditti, 2014; Gunn et al., 2018; Michalsen, 2011; Robison & Miller, 2016).

Relying primarily on often unprepared and unwilling informal social support networks after release has been shown to negatively impact incarcerated individuals’ chances of successful reentry in general (Willging et al. 2016). While social support theory asserts that “close relationships (with family, friends, and intimate partners) are fundamental to thriving because they help individuals successfully cope with adversity” (Feeney & Collins, 2015, p. 6), this does not appear to be the case for formerly incarcerated mothers. For incarcerated individuals, including mothers, to effectively reenter society, support groups and supportive family members and friends are critical and are a source of strength, motivation, and refuge in adverse circumstances (Parsons & Warner-Robbins, 2002). However, these networks must be provided with the necessary resources to adequately reengage and support the formerly incarcerated mother. When a mother is incarcerated, child welfare agencies and social workers must support her family and the children on the outside to maintain stability and prevent family breakdown.

In general, the review suggests that both formal and informal systems are essential for a formerly incarcerated mother to reclaim her role as a mother and rebuild an effective relationship with her children, but currently both systems are inadequate. Access to sufficient and quality rehabilitation services and a combination of formal and informal supports could give them a chance to achieve recovery more quickly and with less turmoil and alleviate maternal distress. These supports also help formerly incarcerated mothers better parent and care for their children and reduce recidivism (Lareau, 2003). Formal supports that address the unique needs and characteristics of formerly incarcerated mothers are important in addition to informal supports. The latter include rehabilitation programmes, counseling support for formerly incarcerated mothers and their children, and community-based reentry services. Helping professionals should also assist them and their families to better coordinate the system of available services, as well as identify any assistance that needs to be developed.

Implication to Policy

The findings have important policy implications. In general, most post-incarceration policies restrict basic civil rights such as employment, housing, economic and emotional care for families and children, and education. In some countries (e.g., the United States), this extends to voting rights and primary forms of transportation, such as automobiles (Hall et al. 2016). These policies have mainly focused on the use of parole and community supervision in relation to drug use and other illegal activities, but not employment and other basic needs of formerly incarcerated individuals including mothers (Hall et al. 2016). In some countries, there are no post-incarceration policies at all (Dissel, 2007). Therefore, governments and other stakeholders should focus on developing new policies that can help formerly incarcerated individuals for successful reentry. These policies should also be gender sensitive so that they address the specific needs of women. Existing policies should be amended and developed into more inclusive and less discriminatory

policy frameworks that offer formerly incarcerated individuals, including mothers, a second chance to become law-abiding citizens (Hall et al. 2016). Criminal justice policies and interventions should be informed by evidence-based and empirical research that engages formerly incarcerated individuals, their families, professionals, and their wider community. Many governments and policies around the world spend billions of dollars on incarceration (Schmitt et al., 2010), but they should also focus on allocating a few million more to return incarcerated individuals to the community to reduce recidivism. Finally, policies need to work holistically on the issues along the life course that influence women's path into offending in the first place. Investing in educational opportunities and equal participation in the labor market for girls and women is critical to preventing their involvement in illegal activities.

Limitations of the Review

Although the overall quality of the included papers was good and satisfactory, there were limitations in the methodology used in the reviewed studies. There was insufficient information on ethical issues and unclear descriptions of the design, participant selection and analysis process. However, to ensure that the research included was ethically and methodologically sound, only peer-reviewed papers were included.

With only 14 papers retrieved, the review demonstrates a lack of available internationally published material that exhaustively captures the voice of incarcerated mothers after release. The few studies available are only from the Western countries of the USA and the UK (see Table 3), so other international perspectives are missing. The restriction of the search strategy to English-language articles may contribute to this limitation. There may be studies in other non-English speaking countries that have not been published in English and are missing from this review. We therefore currently have limited understanding of the experiences of mothers after imprisonment in other national contexts, particularly from the Global South. Formerly incarcerated mothers in these countries may have different experiences due to socio-cultural and economic differences. This affects the reliability and inclusiveness of the review findings.

Finally, most of the studies focused on the general reentry experiences of formerly incarcerated mothers, and specific accounts of their experiences as mothers were shallow. They talked a lot about the past (see themes 2 and 3) in terms of bad experiences in prison and their poor childhood and informal support systems, but what seems to be missing is a thorough examination of the here and now. The current literature lacks in-depth knowledge of what relationships with children, wider family and intimate relationships are like now. Although formerly incarcerated mothers report a lack of access to support systems, they do not thoroughly discuss how they currently access post-release rehabilitation programmes and the challenges of accessing these services.

In summary, many formerly incarcerated mothers find it much more difficult to fulfill their mothering role after incarceration, although motherhood continues to be an important motivating factor in their reentry process. The findings of the review highlight the challenge of resuming the mothering role after incarceration and shed light on the importance of developing a coordinated support system to better meet the needs of formerly incarcerated mothers at various levels. With adequate material and social supports, many more mothers than in the past will be able to contribute to the well-being of their children and families as they navigate the reentry process. This review also identified the knowledge gap regarding reunification of mothers after incarceration and paved the way for future studies in this area.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors have agreed on the final version and meet at least one of the following criteria:

- Significant contributions to conception, design, analysis and interpretation of data and
- Drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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