

Prison Experiences and Identity in Women's Life Stories: Implications for Reentry. In *Beyond Recidivism: New Approaches to Research on Prisoner Reentry and Reintegration*. Editors Andrea Leverentz, Elsa Y. Chen, and Johnna Christian. New York University Press, 151-171, 2020.

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Reasons for The Research

The research described in this paper clarified the pains of incarceration for women with histories of repeated lawbreaking and it investigates whether and how women experience positive changes in their identity while they are in prison. Knowing the dynamics of positive identity change in prison can provide insight into features of the prison experience that would likely increase women's successful reentry. Documentation of pains of imprisonment that damage identity and the absence of positive identity development suggest features of the prison experience that would likely decrease women's successful reentry.

The Study

The study focused on 44 women who had spent time in prison and were on probation or parole for a felony offense in Michigan in 2011 or 2012. The women had taken part in an interview that asked them to tell their life stories and they talked about time in prison as part of their life stories.

Key Findings

The pain of imprisonment that four out of ten women described was distress from dealing with situations and people, usually relatives, outside the prison. Most often these situations involved the death of a female relative. Just over a third of women highlighted the upsetting experience of separation from children, including harm to their children. Almost as high a proportion of women described painful living conditions in prison, often involving interactions with staff.

About a third of the women made good of negative prison experiences by developing a deepening connection to God. Nearly a quarter of the women said they took advantage of opportunities for change, most often in programs offered in the prisons. A third of women explained how they grew and changed for the better while they were in prison, either due to programming or their own thoughts and actions.

Recommendations for Practitioners and Policy Makers

Prisons can offer grief counseling and support and advice for strategies to maintain good relationships with children while incarcerated. Training can focus on helping staff have supportive communication and relationships with incarcerated women. Opportunities for spirituality and other types of programming promote positive growth and development while women are incarcerated.