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# The Complex Relationship Between Motherhood and Desistance

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Using a sample of 118 drug-involved women originally released from prison in the 1990s and re-interviewed between 2010 and 2011, this paper examines the role motherhood played in the desistance process from crime and substance abuse. Interview narratives revealed that motherhood rarely functioned as a turning point per se that activated desistance, but caring for children did serve to solidify prosocial identities once offenders had transformed their addict/criminal identities. Despite their identity transformations, however, the journey of desistance for the majority of mothers was still a long and arduous path. The reality for these mothers most often resembled a hostile terrain marked by the competing demands of battling addiction, finding employment and suitable housing with a criminal record, establishing visitation and custody rights in family court, and regaining the trust of children and family members who had long ago lost faith in their commitment to their families. This research illuminates the complexities inherent in the desistance process for a contemporary sample of drug involved adult women entrenched within the criminal justice system.

**Keywords** desistance, female offenders, motherhood

## INTRODUCTION

At the end of 2013, 1,256,300 women in the United States were under some form of adult correctional supervision (Glaze & Kaeble, 2014), and in all racial and ethnic groups a large percentage of this population was drug users (Carson, 2014). In fact, many of these women cycle in and out of prison for possession charges or for violations of parole or probation (Belknap, 2010). Society and criminal justice policymakers alike have only recently begun to grapple with the factors related to reintegrating formerly incarcerated individuals, and relatively little of this research has been devoted to the female reentry experience. In addition to the significance of theoretical turning points highlighted in the extant life course literature, including a stable marriage and gainful employment (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Sampson & Laub, 1993), several researchers have recently turned their attention to the effect of motherhood status on the desistance process. Although some have found that women with children are more likely to decrease their offending behavior compared to women without children (Giordano, Seffrin, Manning, & Longmore, 2011; Kreager, Matsueda, & Erosheva, 2010; Uggen & Kruttschnitt, 1998), others have found mixed results regarding motherhood and desistance (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002; Michalsen, 2011), others have found no impact (Robbins, Martin, & Surratt, 2009; Stalans & Lurigio, 2015), and still others have highlighted the compounded strain that motherhood places on an already tenuous reentry journey that follows prison release (Brown & Bloom, 2009; Kubiak, Kasiborski, Karim, & Schmittel, 2012; Leverentz, 2014).

Like all desistance research, one of the problems that limits consensus on whether motherhood impacts desistance stems from differences in measurement and samples. For example, some research has relied on community samples of older adolescents who were not necessarily embedded in an adult correctional system (Giordano et al., 2011; Kreager et al., 2010). Other studies have been based on samples of women who have all been detained in adult correctional facilities (Brown & Bloom, 2009; Robbins et al., 2009). The place-of-detention distinction is significant, as studies have demonstrated that individual-level reentry mechanisms are very closely related to the nature of correctional supervision imposed and institutional release planning and support provided (La Vigne, Davies, Palmer, & Halberstadt, 2008; Lynch & Sabol, 2001; Visher & O'Connell, 2012). After a review of this literature, we examine the impact of motherhood on long-term patterns of desistance using qualitative data from a cohort of drug-involved women who were originally released from prison in the early 1990s and then reinterviewed again between 2010 and 2011.

## MOTHERHOOD AND DESISTANCE

The role motherhood plays in recent theorizing about desistance, including Sampson and Laub's age-graded social control theory (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Sampson & Laub, 1993), Giordano and colleagues' cognitive and emotional transformation theory of desistance (Giordano et al., 2002; Giordano, Schroeder, & Cernkovich, 2007), and Paternoster and Bushway's identity theory of desistance (Paternoster, Bachman, Bushway, Kerrison, & O'Connell, 2015; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009), is not an explicit component of each theory, but its relevance is readily apparent. For example, age-graded social control's theoretical assumptions assert that exogenously generated turning points such as finding the right prosocial partner, securing a stable

and satisfying job, or successfully serving in the military may each serve to increase the likelihood of desistance by strengthening conventional social bonds. Like the variables of partnership and good employment, motherhood is also imbued with concepts of discipline, stability, diminished antisocial opportunities, and respectability, and motherhood is typically perceived as a prosocial institution. As such, motherhood may serve in a fashion similar to jobs and marriage to initiate the process of desistance by increasing an individual's prosocial bonds and leaving him or her with less time and fewer opportunities to engage in crime.

In Giordano et al.'s (2002) original formulation, they argued that although turning points such as jobs and marriages, or what they called "hooks for change," were important for desistance, two types of cognitive transformations must first occur in offenders: They must have a greater openness to change, and they must perceive the hook as being salient or important. Other types of cognitive changes, such as a change in how one views crime and the forming of a new conventional replacement self, occur only after and as a result of involvement in conventional roles or hooks. In their enhancement of this symbolic interactionist theory, Giordano et al. (2007) argued that an additional emotional transformation was also a critical component of desistance. They argued that because many if not most offenders' lives were riddled with conflict with parents and intimate others, these recurring conflicts eventually molded an angry or depressive self in an individual that, if not transformed, would become instrumental in offenders' continued involvement in crime. In both theoretical iterations, then, a prosocial role like marriage may provide social support for an offender's initial steps toward desistance from crime by providing help in these requisite cognitive and emotional transformations. Here, too, motherhood may serve as a prosocial role or bond that may serve to help women through the transformation process necessary for desistance.

Although turning points do not play a comparable role in the identity theory of desistance (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009), this framework nevertheless allows for a critical analysis of motherhood's potential significance. The desistance process, Paternoster and Bushway (2009) contended, begins "when perceived failures and dissatisfactions within different domains in life become connected and when current failures become linked with anticipated future failures" (p. 1105), or what Baumeister (1991, p. 304) referred to as the "crystallization of discontent." These initial moves toward desistance may come about in response to a feared self—an image of what the person does not want to be or fears becoming if he or she does not change. Both imagining the feared self and acknowledging the possibility of its realization in the future provide the first steps toward desistance, but to maintain these initial steps the offender must eventually craft a new, more positive image of what he or she wants to become, or the possible self.

This newly emerging prosocial identity, or possible self, then triggers a change in the person's preferences for things like quick and easy money or a substance-induced high to more conventional preferences and social networks. It is this cluster of *internal* changes in identity and preferences and the crafting of the kind of person that one wants to be that both motivates behavior consistent with a prosocial identity (a desire for conventional work, conventional friends, a life free of crime and drugs) and sends a signal to others (like prosocial intimates and employers) that the person is making a change in his or her life. According to the identity theory of desistance, it is this cognitive change in a former offender's identity that both explains the movement into conventional roles and explains why those who had previously been involved in crime would be receptive to prosocial influences. Once individuals make the decision to change, reestablishing prosocial relationships with others, including intimate partners and children, is an extremely

important mechanism for solidifying the former offender's new prosocial identity. It is at this point that motherhood would be hypothesized to increase the likelihood of desistance.

In sum, all three of these theories offer somewhat different yet important roles for motherhood to play in the desistance process (for a more thorough discussion of the differences among these theories, see Paternoster et al., 2015). Data suggest that nearly two thirds of women in state prisons had children before they committed the offense for which they are now serving time (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008; Turanovic, Rodriguez, & Pratt, 2012). Clearly, then, it is not the structural role of motherhood that inhibits offending behavior, as this prosocial role did not prevent offenders from offending, at least for the crimes for which they were serving sentences. However, when offenders *are ready to* adopt a prosocial identity, reclaiming their role as mother may indeed serve to solidify their desired change (Opsal, 2011). This view was also expressed by others who have found that prosocial roles such as employment and partnership are unlikely to lead to desistance in the absence of a personal commitment and deliberate intention to quit crime on the part of the offender (Bachman, Kerrison, Paternoster, O'Connell, & Smith, 2015; Bushway & Reuter, 1997; Lyngstad & Skardhamar, 2013; Skardhamar & Savolainen, 2014). This theoretical time order specification may be one reason why the literature on motherhood and desistance remains largely equivocal.

Research that has relied on community-based samples of women, especially samples of adolescents and young adults, appears to have found the most positive results for motherhood on desistance from offending. For example, using a longitudinal sample of young women in disadvantaged Denver neighborhoods, Kreager et al. (2010) examined the effects of motherhood on delinquency and alcohol and marijuana use for those who had their first children at age 19 or younger compared to those who became mothers later in the life course. In general, Kreager and his colleagues found that motherhood decreased all forms of delinquency over the nearly 12-year period examined. It is important to note that the average age of this sample was 17.3 years, and although it was not discussed, it is assumed that very few if any of these young women ever served time in an adult prison facility or were even arrested.

Giordano et al. (2011) also relied on a community-based longitudinal data set called the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study collected in four waves, with an average age in the last wave of 21 years. About one quarter of the 566 women in the sample became parents during the study, but only about 6% of these pregnancies were planned or desired. Women with intentional pregnancies showed subsequent declines in crime and drug use; however, those who reported that they did not want their pregnancies showed no such declines. Giordano and her colleagues (2011) also found an interaction effect for parenthood and socioeconomic status in that those from highly disadvantaged backgrounds were less likely to experience this decline in crime compared to their less disadvantaged counterparts. It is interesting that interviews with this sample revealed that many of the parents were able to communicate a "parenthood has changed me" narrative (p. 412), but the transformation they spoke of did not translate to desistance in many of the cases. Thus, this study revealed a much more nuanced picture of the effects that parenthood has on criminal behavior.

Studies relying on samples of formerly incarcerated women similarly illustrate a complex picture of motherhood and its role in desistance. For example, after interviewing more than 100 young women who were formerly housed in an Ohio institution for delinquent girls, Giordano et al. (2002) found that mothers' attachment to their children did not significantly increase the likelihood of future desistance from drugs and crime. Similarly, Uggen and Kruttschnitt

(1998) examined data from the National Supported Work Demonstration Project, which included “Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) recipients, hardcore drug users, recently released ex-offenders, and youth dropouts” (p. 347). Although this sample was not entirely made up of individuals who had served time in prison, in addition to the former offenders who had been incarcerated, half of those in the youth dropout sample also had a criminal record and had been recently incarcerated. Survival analyses revealed that after 3 years, women who had children were significantly less likely to leave a state of desistance and make illegal earnings. However, the women with children were not less likely than the comparison group to have been arrested during that same time period.

Robbins et al. (2009) examined whether women with children were more likely to enter and successfully complete a therapeutic community treatment program for drug abuse. Their study included 276 women who were followed for 18 months after their release from prison. They found that women who planned to live with their minor children following their release from custody were more likely to enroll in the drug treatment program but were not more likely to complete the program. Moreover, when controlling for other risk factors, the authors shared that “the anticipated maternal roles did not significantly predict reentry success” (p. 405) in the form of decreasing drug use during the follow-up period. Other recent quantitative work by Stalans and Lurigio (2014) examining factors related to noncompliance with probation and recidivism for adult female offenders found that although women caring for children were less likely to miss probation appointments, they were not less likely to recidivate.

Analyses of qualitative data from formerly incarcerated women illuminate more clearly the extremely complex role motherhood may play in the desistance process and reentry experience for adult women. For example, after interviewing a voluntary sample of 100 previously incarcerated mothers in New York City, Michalsen (2011) found that children were perceived “both [as] prosocial bonds and as stressors” (p. 357). It is important to note that this sample was more representative of incarcerated mothers leaving state and federal prisons today. Most of the women in Michalsen’s sample had extensive histories of criminal justice involvement, and the majority had not yet been reunited with their children, as they were still navigating the bureaucratic and emotional hurdles of this reunification. The average age of this sample was 40, and fewer than 5% had obtained permanent housing on release. Although the majority of the women interviewed were “engaging in fewer behaviors that could get them in trouble at the time of the interview” (p. 356), when the women were asked about the reasons for this desistance, decreases in substance abuse or sobriety and incarceration were most likely to be mentioned first. Despite this, the vast majority of mothers in this study revealed their love for and pride in their children, often highlighting their children’s accomplishments. In fact, one theme that emerged was the women’s deliberate delay in reunification, a sacrifice made with the intention of affording their children some measure of continued stability. Although they did not mention it first, more than one quarter of the women reported that their children played a role in their desistance behaviors. Unfortunately, the motherhood role was more often trumped by the reported need for many to simply survive after prison by maintaining sobriety and earning enough money to feed and shelter themselves.

Other insight into the difficult terrain women leaving prison must navigate was offered by Brown and Bloom (2009), who examined the case files of 203 female parolees and interviewed 25 of them. They similarly found that the maternal role often motivated women to be successful, but reassuming these familial roles was aggravated by poverty, unstable housing, lack of access

to social services, and addiction. Of course, these were the same factors that contributed to the women being in prison in the first place. Unfortunately for most, the role of mother became even more difficult because “conviction, incarceration, and absence have eroded parental authority in both its moral and practical dimensions” (p. 326).

In sum, some research suggests that the status of motherhood may catalyze desistance efforts for younger, less criminally enmeshed offenders. Other studies underscore the ways in which competing obligations and struggles reconciled by contemporary drug-involved women entrenched within the criminal justice system disrupt motherhood roles and practices and complicate the desistance process. The lack of consistency in these findings signals a need for an analysis that explores the histories of a range of women (mixed race, age, and offending patterns) all exiting similar correctional experiences (i.e., adult state prisons) and returning to similar community contexts. This study contributes to this understanding by examining the impact of motherhood on desistance for a contemporary cohort of drug-involved former female prisoners entrenched within the criminal justice system returning for the most part to home lives and communities marked by concentrated disadvantage.

## METHODS

### Sample

The data for this study came from a longitudinal analysis of seriously drug-involved offenders who were originally released from the State of Delaware correctional system between the years 1990 and 1996, with a subsample reinterviewed between 2010 and 2011. The baseline study was designed to examine the effectiveness of a drug therapeutic community and consisted of 1,250 male and female offenders who were randomly assigned to enroll in the therapeutic community treatment condition (Inciardi, Martin, & Butzin, 2004). Subjects in the study were first interviewed while still incarcerated, approximately 9 months prior to release (referred to throughout this article as the *baseline incarceration*), and were reinterviewed after that baseline release at 6, 18, 42, and 60 months.

To determine patterns of desistance within the larger sample, we obtained arrest histories for each offender that covered the years 1990 to 2008 from the Delaware Statistical Analysis Center, which records all arrests and imprisonments in the State of Delaware. These data were augmented by arrest data from the National Crime Information Center in order to capture arrests that occurred outside the State of Delaware. With these data we amassed a count of the number of arrests for each person per year. Incarceration data were collected from each offender since 1990 and included entrance and exit from prison data for each sentence. This information was used to compute the number of days free per year to control for the time the individuals were in a correctional setting. To illuminate the various paths of desistance for the original cohort, our analysis strategy began with the estimation of a group-based trajectory model for these arrest history data (Nagin, 2005). A graph of the offending trajectories for the five-group model (all quadratic) that best fit the data is shown in Figure 1 (for a full discussion of the procedures used for this trajectory analysis, see Bachman, Kerrison, Paternoster & O’Connell, 2013). We present this model only because it was used as the sampling frame for the qualitative component of our study, which constituted the primary data used for this article.

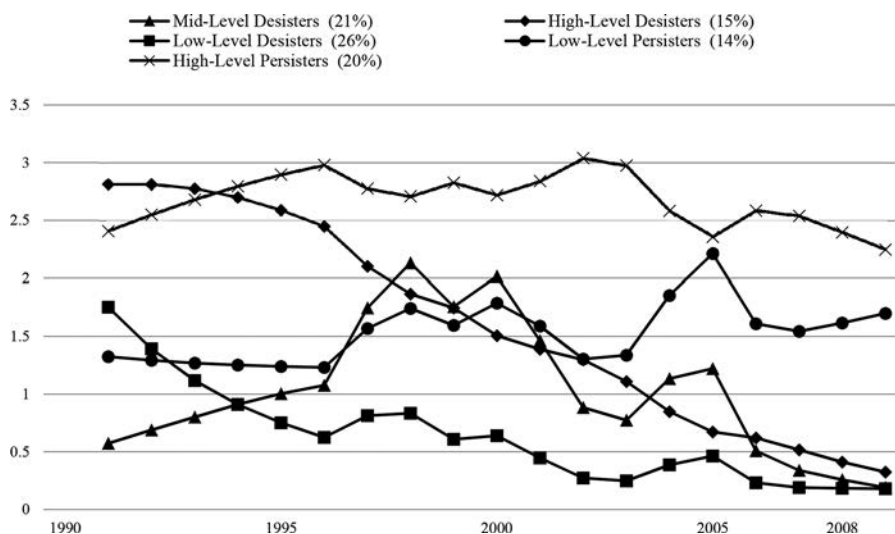


FIGURE 1 Trajectories of 1990–2008 arrests for the original cohort of drug-involved offenders used as a sampling frame for the intensive interviews.

The names provided for each group are purely subjective based on the average number of arrests each group accumulated per year after release. For example, the low-level desisters started at about 1.75 arrests per year after release, but by 5 years after release they consistently had the lowest annual arrest numbers over time. In contrast, the high-level persisters had a fairly flat trajectory moving between two and three annual arrests over the 1990–2008 time period. We used this trajectory model to select respondents for intensive interviews because it would ensure that a representative sample of both persisters and desisters, at least according to official arrest data, were included in our interview sample. Respondents from the original cohort were randomly selected from within each of the five trajectory groups, which resulted in 304 ( $n = 118$  females) intensive face-to-face interviews. The focus of this article is exclusively on narratives from these female respondents.

The purpose of these qualitative interviews was to illuminate the mechanisms for change in offending over time and allow the respondents to speak directly for themselves about what changes they felt they had undergone over the years since their baseline incarceration. Our goal was to examine the role that motherhood played in the sequencing of events throughout the lives of these women as it related to both criminal offending and substance abuse.

### Interview Methods

Respondents selected for interviews were first contacted by mail requesting that they call a research office phone number at a local university if they were willing to participate in the interview. Follow-up was needed in many cases and was done first by mailing another letter, then by making phone calls, and finally by making personal visits in a few cases. All interviews lasted from 1 to 3 hr and were digitally recorded. Respondents were compensated \$100 for their time and travel expenses. It was not surprising that sample attrition was a significant problem when



we were attempting to contact drug-involved former offenders years after their baseline incarceration release. Approximately 11% of the original sample were deceased, 13% were still incarcerated, 3% were found to be living out of state, and 7% were unreachable by any means. Although we originally did not want to conduct interviews with those still in prison because the Department of Corrections did not allow tape recorders, three women who were in the persisting offending trajectories were interviewed while in custody in an effort to increase the sample sizes of these trajectory groups. Interviewer field notes were used to analyze the three interviews conducted in correctional settings as well as two digitally recorded interviews whose files were corrupted. Because of the relatively small number of women from other racial/ethnic groups in the original cohort, only African American and White women were selected for the sample. Of the 118 women interviewed, the majority were African American (73%), and the mean age was 45 years at the time of the interview. The response rate for those who were successfully contacted and living in Delaware was approximately 96%.

The goal of the interviews was to uncover what Agnew (2006) referred to as “storylines” in understanding criminal offending. A storyline is a “temporally limited, interrelated set of events and conditions that increase the likelihood that individuals will engage in crime” (p. 121). The interview guide resembled an event history calendar, which has proven to be an extremely useful tool for collecting retrospective data on life events within different domains such as subjects’ relationship changes, medical history, and offending (Belli, Stafford, & Alwin, 2009). Another important tool we used in our interview guide to facilitate respondents’ recall was the placement of arrest and incarceration dates obtained from official data within the calendars, as well as key life events such as birthdays, to be used as heuristic cues to aid recall. These cues proved extremely useful for helping respondents recall both their offending histories as well as other life events. Despite the utility of the event history calendar–inspired interview guide, however, the interviews were primarily open ended and resembled conversations rather than an exchange of formal survey questions and answers. For each criminal and drug relapse event self-reported or obtained from official records, respondents were asked to recreate the event both perceptually and structurally, and interviewers probed for respondents’ cognitive decision-making processes surrounding those events.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and imported into NVivo for coding. The analytical process of coding involved a number of sequential stages that identified ideas and themes opposed to counts of explicit words or phrases (Namey, Guest, Thairu, & Johnson, 2008). The coding team included this article’s first and second authors as well as two graduate research assistants. The coding process began with a list of initial categories derived from the existing desistance literature and included such key indicators as turning points, indicators of agency and readiness for change, and the psychological indicators of discontent and fear. Before coding began, training sessions ensured that definitions of each category were understood and that consensus was reached for a standardized practice of coding procedures. Next all researchers coded the same transcripts and discussed their coding strategies during group meetings. In these team meetings, decisions to add new categories through a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) were adjudicated and coding discrepancies were discussed and resolved. This team dynamic, we believe, allowed the emotional expression of the researchers to enhance the conceptual decision-making process (Sanders & Cuneo, 2010).

The coding process continued with eight weekly reliability meetings in which a new interview was coded by all four researchers. To facilitate future analyses, all emergent themes were coded, which resulted in more than 20 main categories (e.g., discontent, turning points, incarceration) and more than 100 subcategories used in the coding scheme. This coding strategy

allowed a breadth of coding domains to be created that were not mutually exclusive but would be invaluable to future research using these data, even though fewer codes may have allowed us to more easily provide global tallies of emergent themes. Discrepancies in coding did not come from a lack of correspondence with key domains but from the fact that some coders may have simultaneously placed a narrative into several domains, whereas another coder may have placed it within only one domain. For example, one coder may have placed the mention of childhood abuse by a mother in several domains, such as relationship with mother, childhood abuse, and/or blame for drug use, whereas another coder may have placed this mention within the childhood abuse domain only. Still, intercoder reliability ratings were acceptable (kappa coefficients were generally .70 or higher). The tree node domains helped us organize the transcripts into meaningful segments, but ultimately our conclusions were based on a holistic reading of the interviews in their entirety, looking for trends in those interviews that involved true desistance compared to those that did not (Namey et al., 2007). Moreover, this analysis strategy is consistent with the philosophy of qualitative and constructivist/interpretivist research (Bachman & Schutt, 2015) compared to a more quantitative approach.

### Self-Reported Desistance

Interviews revealed that respondents who may have been placed in a desisting category based on official arrest data frequently self-reported still being involved in criminal activity and/or illegal substance use. Of course, this is not a novel finding (Piquero, Schubert, & Brame, 2014; Wiesner, Capaldi, & Kim, 2007), but because of these discrepancies, it was decided to operationalize desistance for this article using self-reported behavior instead of the trajectories based on official data.

The problems inherent in operationalizing self-reported desistance have been acknowledged by others (Bottoms, Shapland, Costello, Holmes, & Muir, 2004; Maruna, 2001; Maruna, Lebel, Mitchell, & Naples, 2004). In fact, most official and self-reported offending data indicate that many offenders intermittently engage in criminal behavior (Carlsson, 2012; Piquero, 2004), so proposing a time cutoff point from which to denote desistance is a fairly precarious enterprise. We recognize these issues and have adopted what we believe to be a relatively conservative definition of desistance. Like Maruna (2001), who noted that “12 months of drug-free, crime-free, and arrest-free behavior is a significant life change worthy of examination” (p. 48), we operationalized crime desistance as *not* being under correctional supervision and *not* having engaged in any criminal activity during the past 12 months. Substance use desistance was defined as *not* being under correctional supervision and *not* having used illegal drugs, including misusing prescribed medications, or *not* having used alcohol if addicted to alcohol, during the past 12 months.

Table 1 presents descriptive information on self-reported desistance for the 105 cases in which self-reported desistance could be validly coded in the transcribed interviews. As can be seen, at the time of their interviews, the majority (54%) of all respondents reported using illegal substances during the past 12 months, regardless of having no official arrests in the previous year, but fewer were still engaging in other illegal activity (24%). It should also be noted that there were no race differences in self-reported desistance: 53% of African American women reported using illegal substances within the past year compared to 57% of White women; 24% and 25% of African American and White women, respectively, reported engaging in other criminal activity. The qualitative analysis that follows provides the themes that emerged regarding the effect of motherhood on offending and drug use for those who self-reported having

TABLE 1  
Self-Reported Desistance for Female Respondents Interviewed ( $n = 105$ )

<i>Variable</i>	%
African American	73
Had children at baseline of original study	57
Mean age at first adult arrest	22
Mean age at interview	44
Self-reported offending behavior	
Did not use illegal substances or engage in criminal activity after first release from prison (immediate desistance)	3
Used illegal substances within year of interview	54
Crack	29
Marijuana	19
Heroin	12
Still addicted to alcohol	14
Illegal use of prescription drugs	7
Combination of drugs	19
Engaged in other criminal activity within year of interview	24
Violence	16
Theft/fraud	48
Violation of parole/probation	16
Other	24

desisted from both substance abuse and crime and those who were still persisting in those activities. All names of people, locations, and employers have been replaced with pseudonyms.

## RESULTS

### Desisters

#### *Immediate Desistance*

Because our sample was a prison-based cohort of women, being a mother during their baseline incarceration did not appear to affect their propensity to engage in illegal substance use or other criminal activity initially. Unfortunately, for the vast majority of the women in our sample, motherhood did not prevent them from engaging in these behaviors a second time. Motherhood status stopped only three mothers in our sample from using drugs or engaging in other crimes after their baseline release from prison in the early 1990s. Marilyn was one of the few desisting mothers in our sample who left prison for the first and only time, swearing she would never put herself or her children in that position again. She believed that her reentry success was attributed to her limited drug use (maintaining that she was not addicted) and her mother's sustained efforts to keep her relationship with her son strong by calling frequently and coming to visit whenever possible.

#### *Reclaiming the Motherhood Role*

Despite motherhood not serving as a turning point from criminal activity after their baseline release, virtually every mother we interviewed loved her children and sincerely wanted to be a

good mother despite her criminal behavior. However, until their addictions were overcome, the majority of these mothers were engaging in multiple battles, which included gaining secure employment and housing, staying drug and crime-free, and reuniting with children and other family members who were reluctant to trust that their desistance was real. Joyce was in her late 40s at the time of our interview, and her story is representative of those of many of these women who eventually desisted. She had been addicted to cocaine for many years, which led to fraudulent check cashing to support her habit along with three periods of incarceration.

Although Joyce's mother had originally cared for her children during her first incarceration, her children's father eventually took custody of them during her second incarceration and moved them to another state. After her second release, she had to file a formal petition in family court to regain visitation and custody of her children while simultaneously finding employment, finding affordable housing so the court would deem her home suitable for her children, continue after-care treatment for her addiction, and meet regularly with her parole officer. When she was unsuccessful in family court the first time, she relapsed and ended up in prison a third time. However, while in prison the last time, she realized that if she did not change, she would never see her children again and would probably end up dying alone and as an addict. Imagining this feared self is consistent with the identity theory of desistance and has been found to be a key cognitive manifestation in the desistance process (Bachman, Kerrison, Paternoster, O'Connell & Smith, 2015). When Joyce was eligible for release on parole during her third incarceration, she refused because she wanted to take advantage of the safety gleaned from a restricted prison setting until she was sure she was strong enough for the battles that awaited her on the outside. When she eventually left prison the third time, she focused on the employment and housing battles first because she knew that she would be successful in family court only after these structural elements were in place. With the help of an aftercare counselor, Joyce was finally able to successfully satisfy the custody criteria imposed by the family court, first being allowed to visit her children and finally being granted joint custody. This was a 3-year battle. At the time of our interview with Joyce, she stated,

I got my kids back and we moved into a three-bedroom apartment... I was still working at the [restaurant]. My kids were getting a little bit older so I got them involved in T-ball... My life was the kids, my job, Little League, and I volunteered in classrooms... I just started pouring all my time into my family.

Joyce's story illuminates the complicated journey many of the desisting mothers we interviewed made. Although motherhood was not a turning point per se that activated desistance, once individuals had successfully battled their addictions, staying crime-free was more likely, and being able to reclaim their prosocial roles as mothers helped to anchor their new conformist identities.

For the other desisting mothers we interviewed, desistance was a similarly lengthy process that involved several terms of incarceration. None of these cases depicted the idealized reception of a mother coming home to the open arms of a loving and forgiving family. Regaining the trust of their children and extended family was most often a very protracted and painful process. For example, Annelle, who had custody of her older children when she was sent to prison for a second drug possession charge, was successful in reestablishing her role as a mother, but she still remembered the difficulty of gaining their trust. She recalled making dinner for her teenage

children one night and spending too much time in the bathroom. Because she was in the bathroom for about 10 min, her children presumed that she was in there getting high. She vividly described this instance of suspicion and surveillance by her daughter:

[My daughter] said, “Mom, what are you doing?” I said, “Nothing. I’m not doing nothing.” She said, “Yes, you are. Stop calling it ‘doing nothing.’” I came downstairs and said, “Are you all ready to eat?” and nobody wanted to eat, so I said, “What’s wrong with you all . . . ? I’m not high. I didn’t do anything.”

These family dramas were typical of women who had spent years battling addiction and as a result had to convince not only criminal justice officials that they had finally changed but also their children and other extended family members as well. In fact, one mother who desisted in her late 40s and reestablished a relationship with her adult children recalled them not letting her leave the house alone for several months following her last release from prison. She used a grade school metaphor to describe the accountability measure imposed by her family:

It was like the buddy system for little kids. It was like they didn’t trust me to do anything by myself because they thought I would go out and get high so they never let me go out alone for a long time.

Many reunion narratives illuminated the difficult terrain women must navigate when stepping back into a family as a biological mother. Despite even the noblest efforts by extended family to retain connections through family visits and/or phone calls during incarceration, there is a great deal of restorative work to be done to familial bonds on returning home from prison. Beverly’s characterization of this process represents these cases well. She stated,

My oldest daughter was like, “So you’re going to come back and try to be my mother?” And I was like, “Well, I’m going to try to be your friend first, but I can’t make up for the lost time . . .” It took time but gradually it came. But I mean, it took years.

Many of the women we interviewed shared similar stories of the difficulties they encountered when attempting to regain the trust of their children.

### *Motherhood Lost*

Other women who had desisted were still in the process of being reunited with their children and extended families. For example, Roshanna’s son was raised by his grandmother and was an older teen by the time she had beaten her addiction. Roshanna had remarried and now had a stable home of her own, but her son still refused to leave his grandmother’s home. Roshanna’s life since recovery can be described as a reunification dance with her son, attempting to be the mother but never quite achieving success:

It hurts me a lot, I often cry about it . . . He will call to see if we have any presents for him on his birthday and at Christmas . . . we will try to get him to come over for weekends but by the time we get over to the house [to pick him up], he plays like he’s sick and he sends his grandmom down saying he’s sick and [she says], “He doesn’t feel like going and I don’t think he should go.”

Because of their addictions, many women like Roshanna believed that allowing their children to stay in stable environments was preferable to fighting for custody, especially when they could not afford a decent place to live. For example, Janet's parents raised her two children, and while she was "in her addiction" she purposefully stayed away from them. She was often arrested for prostitution, and as the local newspaper frequently listed those arrested for such crimes, she did not want to "shame her family" or further jeopardize any chance of reintegration by risking them seeing her name among those listed. She recalled, "My addiction was severe. I just wanted my kids to have a stable life where they could grow up and have functional lives. I couldn't give that to them at the time." Janet had since desisted from crime and substance abuse and had established a relationship with both of her children, though she was treated like more of a sister than a mother. "Their grandmom will always be their mother to them," she admitted. For Janet, acknowledging her responsibility to protect her children, even if that meant she could not be present in their lives, was an important element in her desistance journey.

### *A Second Chance at Motherhood*

Some of the women we interviewed had lost custody of their younger children, but once they had become drug and crime-free, they were able to engage in motherhood again either by having other children or by being involved as grandparents for their children's children. Many of these women had one or more early teenage pregnancies resulting in children necessarily surrendered to foster care, adoption, or the guardianship of other relatives. For example, Mary struggled with addiction most of her young life. She allowed her first son to be adopted because she was addicted to heroin at the time of his birth and her parents refused to take custody of him. This caused her a great deal of heartache and guilt, but she saw no other choice at the time. She spent almost two decades battling her addiction, in and out of prison, often living on the street. She recalled her final arrest for selling drugs and, knowing that it would be her last, "I just walked right over to the police car and said, 'Arrest me.' I told them I was going to die out here on the street if they didn't arrest me and get me some help." It was at that point that Mary began her transformation. She had gone through the painful opiate withdrawals in treatment before, but this time she knew it was going to be the last time. At the time of our interview, Mary had been drug- and crime-free for more than 7 years, and she was married and had a 5-year-old daughter. Thankful and reflective, she shared,

I think this baby is really a miracle because out on the street I didn't use birth control or any protection. I could have gotten pregnant or AIDS or some other horrible illness but I didn't. It is a gift from God that I get a second chance to be a mother.

It is important to note that this second chance at motherhood came only after she had desisted from both drugs and crime.

Grandchildren also provided many of our desisting respondents with a second chance—an opportunity to get parenting "right." Sharon was in and out of prison for much of her adult life, and her mother had custody of her daughter. When she got clean, however, Sharon was there to support her daughter when she had her first child and recalled the joy it brought her:

I'm there with her [daughter] and I'm helping her raise her kids now. And you know what she told me? You know I'll tell you what she told me because my mother had guardianship of her when I was

doing all my mess and right before my birthday, she said, “Mom, you weren’t there for me when I was coming up, but I was taken care of . . . but I’m glad you’re here now. ‘Cause now is when I really need you.” Girl, tears just started rolling down . . . and that made me feel some kind of good, you hear me?

Similarly, Tanya was in and out of prison while her two children were coming of age under their father’s care. When she was able to get on her feet and remain drug-free, she started the long struggle to regain her children’s trust and become a part of their lives. She stated, “Now that I have that bond and trust back with my family, they trust me and allow me to spend time with the grandbabies. I get to babysit, you know? That’s my income right now.” For women like Tanya, this second chance at parenting was an extremely important part of cementing their new prosocial identities as well as helping to heal the pain that resulted from the severed bonds they had with their own children. Although the majority of the women who had desisted were aware of the precarious nature of sobriety, most no longer perceived themselves as addicts or criminals. Tanya stated simply, “I’m sick of what I had to give up because of this drug. I’m no longer looking at myself as an addict . . . I see myself as a mother, as a daughter, a friend.”

### Persisters

Recall that almost half of the women we interviewed self-reported abusing substances and about one quarter self-reported offending (see Table 1). The majority of the mothers who were persisting did not have custody of their children, but about half of these persisting mothers whose children were living with their parents, former partners, or other extended family still attempted to maintain some contact with their children. Some of these attempts resulted in more broken promises, sparking feelings of hurt and anger on both sides. For example, Ruth was in her late 40s with two children who lived with their father in another state. In an effort to secure visitation rights, she was saddled with an expensive family court battle, costing her most of the wages she earned working at a grocery store. When talking about her ex-husband, she recalled, “Until [year], we never heard from their dad, didn’t know if he was dead or alive . . . all of a sudden he calls out of the blue and now [the children think] he’s the best thing in the world.” Ruth expressed a great deal of anguish and pain over her children being raised by their stepmother, whom they now called “Mom,” and this appeared to exacerbate her hopelessness about ever getting back on her feet. When she and her children talked on the phone, she promised them their reunion but lamented their response: “[The children] say, ‘We will never come back. We don’t want to come back to all that again.’ I know they’re done, they’re tired.” Absent the opportunity to cement her motherhood role and status, Ruth reported feeling far less motivated to desist from substance abuse.

It is remarkable that a few persisters we interviewed appeared to be maintaining both employment and parenting. These women had been in and out of the criminal justice system but were now attempting to have their drug use remain undetected. For example, Loren appeared almost defiant when asked how it was possible to hold down a full-time job and take care of two kids while using cocaine and alcohol:

*Interviewer:* And who’s taking care of your kids while this is going on?

*Loren:* I am. My kids have always been with me.

*Interviewer:* But while you're at work or while your high?

*Loren:* They go to school and day care and I take care of my kids whether I'm high or not.

*Interviewer:* And working? How did you do that?

*Loren:* Go to work, get paid, go pay the bills, and get high.

For others, going back to selling drugs on the street was the only means of securing any income. When asked whether she ever thought about the consequences that "hustling" on the street may have had for her children, Dynasty, who at the time of our interview abused both cocaine and heroin, explained, "Because [selling drugs] that was our way of surviving." She went on to say that when her teenage son moved in with her she stopped using cocaine because it was cutting into her profits and compelling her to stay out at night, which she could not do with her son living at home. She did, however, provide a justification for her continued—and from her perspective less problematic—heroin use:

*Dynasty:* So once I stopped [using cocaine], things got so much better, all I was doing was my heroin and you know selling that.

*Interviewer:* You're selling and using?

*Dynasty:* Mhmm.

*Interviewer:* So you really aren't clean? Clean is when you're not—

*Dynasty:* Right, right, right.

*Interviewer:* Alright, that's okay. I just wanted to make sure.

*Dynasty:* But I was clean from the coke because that's what was taking everything [the money for the household] and causing the problems. You know we couldn't really make a profit you know because the cocaine—see with heroin you could just lay back and chill, with coke you going to be ripping and running all night, spending your money. So I stopped and it was a good thing I did because I had to take [my son] to school in the mornings.

For Dynasty, parenting curbed her drug use and criminal offending for a brief period but ultimately disrupted her activity to an extent that she could not tolerate. Ultimately she chose to continue selling drugs because her criminal record made it difficult to find employment.

For the other persisters we interviewed, drug addiction, crime, and periods of incarceration had severed all ties with family and left them to fight for survival on their own. These women had simply stopped attempting to play all of their roles, including that of mother, because it was impossible to both sustain their addiction and juggle the demands of a family. For example, Jacky was in her 50s and was still addicted to drugs. She was living with a much older man who supported them both with his disability income because "he didn't ask for much," and she still occasionally "turned tricks" for extra money. She vividly described her thinking:

*Interviewer:* So think back, because that's what we want to understand. [After your last release from prison] you're clean and you're back out of jail, your kids are living with their dad and your mom. What are the processes going through your head?

*Jacky:* The process is that my kids are with my mom and I know that they hate me. I want to be with them but . . . but . . . I like getting high and I'm not ready to give that up. They'll be okay. They are safe. My mom's got them.

*Interviewer:* But how about going back to jail again?

*Jacky:* [I always think] I'll do it different. I won't get caught. I won't write checks. I'll support my habit another way and my way then became doing tricks.



Between her continued drug use, forgery, and prostitution, Jacky knew that her children were better off under her mother's care than living with her. Furthermore, this admission freed her from juggling what she saw as conflicting "mother" and "criminal" identities.

Ellen's story is more typical of these persisting women, for whom each incarceration stint had slowly chipped away at their social capital and ability to land on their feet. After her first incarceration for possession charges, her 2-year-old daughter went to live with Ellen's parents. On her first release she had good intentions of staying clean but relapsed, got pregnant with a second child, and was eventually arrested again for prostitution and illegal drug possession. Her parents would not care for the second child, so she was compelled to agree to the child's adoption. Ellen had spent much of her life in and out of prison, and at this point she believed she would never achieve anything. With her criminal record, she found it impossible to get a job, and she was now in her 50s and suffering from significant health problems. Ellen's life remained a rollercoaster of getting high, obtaining money to get high to feel numb, and simply surviving. She had little hope for the future, and when asked where she saw herself in a year, she responded, "Dead." Unfortunately, Ellen had so many deficits at the time of our interview that even this disquieting feared version of herself did little to spark a desire for transformation.

## CONCLUSION

The primary goal of this article was to increase understanding of the underlying role that motherhood plays in the desistance processes among a contemporary sample of adult female offenders. The results of this research support the contention that drug addiction is a chronic lifetime disease characterized by relapses and behaviors that appear undeterred by the threat of either formal or informal sanctions (Anglin, Brown, Dembo, & Leukefeld, 2009). Despite many terms of incarceration and treatment, about half of the women, despite being mothers, were still abusing substances and nearly one quarter self-reported other criminal offending.

Consistent with other research on adult female offenders leaving prison (Brown & Bloom, 2009; Cobbina, 2010; Ferraro & Moe, 2003; Huebner, DeJong, & Cobbina, 2010; Michalsen, 2011; Scroggins & Malley, 2010), this study's results convey the complex nature of the relationship between motherhood and desistance. For this adult sample of drug-involved women entrenched within the criminal justice system, motherhood did not appear to activate desistance for the majority of the women we interviewed. In fact, less than a handful of the mothers we interviewed were able to desist from both substance abuse and crime and reestablish their maternal roles after their first release from prison. However, when women had successfully desisted from both drug use and crime, reestablishing their role as a mother was an extremely important mechanism for solidifying their new prosocial identity. For those who had missed the opportunity to parent because their children had already become adults, reconnecting as grandparents or having another child presented a second chance to confirm their identities as mothers.

These findings are consistent with the identity theory of desistance (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009; Paternoster et al., 2015), which presents desistance as a cognitive process whereby prosocial roles like marriage and motherhood will only be maintained *after* an internal identity change has occurred, and with others who have suggested that if desisters are to (re)claim motherhood, there is a great deal of internal or upfront work (Giordano et al., 2002) that must precede this

reality. Our findings are also consistent with other research examining the role of motherhood in the desistance process for adult women leaving adult prisons that has illuminated the seemingly insurmountable barriers to simply securing a job and a place to live after being released, much less attempting to step back into the role of mother (Brown & Bloom, 2009; Cobbina, 2010; Fader & Traylor, 2015; Opsal, 2015; Sharpe, 2015). The majority of the women we interviewed left prison with few employment opportunities and no safe or permanent place to live. Most returned to family members who had understandably given up on them and had little faith that they would ever truly get clean. Narratives often highlighted how the anonymity and resentment that existed between respondents and their children was only exacerbated by repeated cycling in and out of prison sentences. For these women, gaining the trust of their families and children represented another challenge. These dramas not only were emotionally wrenching but often included legal battles within the family court system for visitation and custody rights that were lost long ago. Thus, despite the sincerest desire to get clean and go straight, women seeking motherhood status as a mechanism of desistance also had to navigate the desires of their often estranged children and the justifiably mistrustful guardians who years ago picked up the pieces when these women could not.

The women in our sample are representative of today's female adult correctional populations, who exhibit long arrest histories, incarcerations, long-term unemployment, and extensive involvement in substance abuse. Furthermore, they were released from adult prisons during a time of economic downturn, when securing gainful employment and affordable housing proved worrisome at best and nonexistent at worst. Almost three quarters of our respondents were African Americans who left prison only to return to neighborhoods marked by high crime, joblessness, and other structural disadvantages. The reentry reality for the majority of the women in our sample did not reflect the fairytale narrative of leaving prison to the open arms of a trusting and loving family. Regaining parental rights was one of many battles these women faced when released from prison. However, despite the severed ties many women had with their children and families, the possibility of reconnection remained a source of hope and inspiration for many.

The painful journey and bureaucratic battles that many of the women we interviewed undertook to reestablish their motherhood role and the importance of this role in solidifying their prosocial identities underscore the importance of correctional programming that fosters familial relationships. Many others have called for gender-responsive programming (for a review, see Van Voorhis, 2012) that includes policies aimed at reducing parental stress and increasing the likelihood of family reunification (Arditti & Few, 2006; Burgess & Flynn, 2013; Celinska & Siegel, 2010; Hoffmann, Byrd, & Kightlinger, 2010; Tasca, Turanovic, White, & Rodriguez, 2014). Reentry must begin well before release and should consider the need for inexpensive mediation and reconciliation forums for inmates and their family members. Restorative justice initiatives may prove remarkably useful to inmates whose family members were often directly victimized or at the very least seriously compromised by offenders' choices and actions (Miller, 2011). However short the rope may be, the tie that binds an inmate and his or her only prosocial associations could mean the difference between desistance and recidivism and merits closer attention and support. These programs must be implemented in tandem with policies aimed at improving outcomes for women in the areas of substance abuse treatment, education, employment, and housing.

We believe that even if they are designed and implemented with the best of practices, these policies unfortunately fail to address the larger problem of America's war on drugs in general

and incarcerating nonviolent drug offenders specifically. This project represents one of the few studies that have followed a group of former offenders over a 20-year period during this metaphorical war. Clearly, the war has not been successful for a large percentage of the women we interviewed, whose only crime, at least in the beginning, was addiction. We encourage the Office of National Drug Control Policy to continue to place more emphasis on harm reduction, with more resources allocated for prevention and treatment in lieu of incarceration, and other programs that reduce the comorbid consequences of drug addiction, including the dissolution of families.

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