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The Bars That Bound Me: A Study of Female Parolees

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Sociology

by

Stephanie Chauntel D'Auria

March 2011

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Dr. Ellen Reese, Chairperson

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2011

The Dissertation of Stephanie Chauntel D'Auria is approved:

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation is dedicated to the women who struggle to make a place for themselves in communities that rarely welcome them back. Their ability to persevere in spite of the many obstacles they've encountered, from birth through adulthood, is no less than inspiring. It is their tenacity that has propelled me forward on this journey.

This experience would not have been possible if it weren't for "Helen" and "Melinda," who granted me access to the halfway house. As social workers at an underfunded, understaffed agency, my questions could have been seen as a burden, yet they always took the time to share their thoughts with me. They treated me as they treated the other "interns," with patience and with appreciation, though it is I who am indebted to them.

While the women I met in the field changed my life, my ability to convey their lives would not have been possible without the dedication and guidance of Dr. Ellen Reese, my mentor and role model. Ellen is brilliant, sincere, and compassionate. I hope to be the teacher and scholar that she is one day. I'm also thankful for my other committee members, Dr. Katja Guenther and Dr. Kirk Williams, who have encouraged and motivated me throughout this project. This dissertation is a reflection of their time and efforts, as well as my own.

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Bars That Bound Me: A Study of Female Parolees

by

Stephanie Chauntel D'Auria

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Sociology  
University of California, Riverside, March 2011  
Dr. Ellen Reese, Chairperson

Halfway houses are thought to benefit offenders as they transition out of prison into society yet research on transitional living facilities is lacking. In this dissertation, I begin to address this gap in the literature by combining ethnographic observations of a state-funded halfway house for female parolees with interviews of women who reside there and the lead staff and interns that assisted them. I found that the house rules and regulations, which are dictated by the funding source, can impede the residents' ability to successfully reintegrate into society and puts them at a greater risk of official sanction. Nevertheless, most of my respondents were grateful for the opportunity to reside at the house because they lacked familial support and access to financial resources.

In this study, I also highlight my respondents' experiences immediately before and after their release from prison. The majority of the women who lived at the house reported receiving little tangible assistance from pre-release counselors or parole agents. Despite this, half of the women characterized their parole agent as helpful because he or she provided words of encouragement. Likewise, those who described the halfway house

as beneficial highlighted the emotional support they received from staff and social work interns.

In addition to investigating the residents' perceptions of the halfway house and their experiences before and after imprisonment, I also explore the social work interns' assumptions about the residents and their barriers to reentry. When the interns began their internship they thought of the residents as dangerous criminals and they believed that the women merely needed to make better behavioral choices in order to avoid returning to prison. However, by the end of their time at the house, they identified a number of challenges that made it difficult for their clients to successfully reintegrate, which suggests that folk theories are dynamic and influenced by interpersonal interactions. This dissertation contributes to our understanding of how women experience reentry, how they perceive the services available to them, and how service providers respond to and interpret the challenges female parolees encounter.



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## **CHAPTER I**

### **LAYING THE FOUNDATION: WOMEN, CRIME, AND REENTRY**

One fall morning in 2009, six women and I sat around an old oak dining table preparing for “supervision.” Supervision happened once a week for two hours, during which time we would give each other updates about our clients and seek advice from our supervisor, a licensed clinical social worker named Helen. Our clients were women on parole, who resided at a transitional living facility, or halfway house, and we were working with them as social work interns. All the women at the table were earning a master’s degree in social work, with the exception of me. I joined the group to learn more about the challenges that women on parole face and to better understand how the halfway house influenced the reintegration process.

On this particular morning, Helen noted that several new residents had just arrived. She explained that we needed to come up with fundraising ideas because we were running out of money and consequently would not be able to pay for new residents’ identification cards. Without identification cards, residents would be unable to access medical services, they would be unable to enroll in school, and they would be unable to attend a drug treatment program. In short, they’d be stuck in the house all day. Helen argued that we lacked funding because the “unjust criminal justice system” didn’t care about our clients. She asserted that our clients were the least powerful among former prisoners, in part because they are women, but also because they did not meet normative gender expectations; most had lost custody of their children because of substance abuse,

rendering them “bad” mothers. Helen resisted this label for our clients, explaining that giving birth to a child doesn’t automatically make one well-suited for motherhood. Yet women who are unable or unwilling to fulfill the expectations of motherhood are pressured to fight for custody of their children, even in women’s prisons, where “the easiest program to get funded is one that focuses on parenting.”

Helen suggested that gender shapes the parole process, as well as the experiences of women in prison. Existing literature on women offenders identifies gender-specific experiences that influence the context of their criminal behavior. One important factor that has been found to impede recidivism among women is reunification with children (Watterson 1996). But what happens when women are released from prison without a home or children to which to return? In some circumstances, state-funded agencies provide a “home,” referred to as a halfway house, to former female prisoners as they reintegrate into society. Yet we know very little about the impact a halfway house has on the parole process, especially for women.

The purpose of this dissertation research is to explore the experiences of women residing in a halfway house as they transition from prison into the free world. My research is based on a combination of ethnographic observations at Second Chances Transitional Home and interviews with both residents and social worker interns at the facility. I argue that SECOND CHANCES subjects residents to social control that they would not otherwise experience. Even so, because of extreme social and material disadvantages, and because they’ve experienced powerlessness for much of their lives,

most residents still report feelings of gratitude towards SECOND CHANCES. With little time, little money, and many state-mandated rules, SECOND CHANCES staff members are forced to spend most of their time monitoring the behavior of residents, which serves to defeat SECOND CHANCES' feminist mission. Moreover, although the social workers identified reasons like poverty and abuse that influenced their clients' paths to crime and prison, the interns were initially resistant to these accounts and instead focused narrowly on blaming the individual. However, over the course of ten months, their assumptions changed, which they attributed to their work with the residents as well as the lessons they learned from the internship supervisor and the house director.

In this chapter, I briefly discuss the setting for this study and the women who reside at SECOND CHANCES. I then compare the women at SECOND CHANCES to the extant research on pre-, during, and post incarceration experiences and I provide an overview of the "pathways perspective," which is framework upon which existing literature is based. I conclude with an overview of existing literature on community correctional facilities and the role of parole agents, which serves to "lay the foundation" for this study while revealing my contribution to existing research.

### **Women and Crime**

SECOND CHANCES was established by a religious organization in the 1970s to help women as they transition out of prison into society. Although privately funded for nearly twenty years, the house now receives its funding from the state and is not affiliated with a religious denomination. Although there are nearly 15,000 women on parole in

Ridgefield County,<sup>1</sup> this state-funded facility offers free room and board to only 15 women.

It is not surprising that a mere 15 beds are made available to former female prisoners. Female offenders have traditionally been neglected by both those who study criminology and by those who serve former offenders (Bloom, Owen and Covington 2002). However, this has changed over the last couple decades, as the incarceration rate for women outpaced that of men. Although there are still more male prisoners than female prisoners, between 1990 and 2000, the number of male prisoners increased 77% while the number of imprisoned women increased 108 percent (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2001).

This increase prompted criminologists and policy makers to dedicate more time and attention to female criminality and a significant body of literature emerged (Bloom 2003). Feminist criminologists asserted that we cannot assume that theories based on the study of men and tested with male-biased samples are equally applicable to men and women (Miller and Mullins 2006). Of importance is the recognition that society and social life are patterned on the basis of gender and that gender inequality permeates our society. These scholars theorized that gender is something that differentiates men's experiences and propensity for crime from women's experiences and they embarked on research to investigate the lives of women before and during incarceration to show the relationship between gender and crime. Their work suggests that pathways to criminal

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonym

activity and desistance from crime are gender-specific; consequently, this approach is called the pathways perspective.

An important conceptual underpinning of the pathways perspective is the relationship between victimization and offending (Miller and Mullins 2006). Specifically, feminist researchers have questioned the victim/offender dichotomy, pointing out that young women often turn to a life of crime in response to, or as a consequence of, early childhood victimization. Moreover, the bulk of the pathways perspective literature on pre-incarceration experiences indicates that female offenders are disadvantaged in particular ways, aside from early abuse experiences. Women are more likely than men to have been physically and sexually abused, involved in a violent personal relationship, addicted to alcohol or drugs, have mental health issues, have a lower education and skills training level, and to be primary caretakers of their children (Bloom, Owen and Covington 2002, Daly 1994; Greer 2000; Paternoster and Bachman 2001). In addition, the majority of women offenders are poor, racial minorities, which was true of my respondents as well (Bloom et al. 2002).<sup>2</sup>

The patterns researchers have found with regard to life experiences among female offenders are reflected in their offending patterns. For example, women are rarely involved in serious violent crime. When women do commit serious violent crime, it is often against a spouse, ex-spouse, or partner and the woman doing so has usually been abused by him (Leonard 2002). Moreover, for men, violent crime is correlated with childhood abuse, but this pattern does not hold for women (Widom 1989). Instead, it

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix A for the demographic profile of my respondents.

appears that the long history of physical or sexual abuse is a factor that leads them to self destructive behavior, like drug use and nonviolent criminal activity (Pollock 2004, Bloom 2003, Dalley 2002, Bloom et al. 2002).

An additional consequence of childhood trauma is mental illness. Criminal women have higher rates of mental illness than the general population and male inmates. In Johnson's (2006) study of 471 incarcerated women, seven out of ten admitted that mental illness had interfered in their lives for at least six months prior to their arrest and the majority had a concurrent mental health and substance abuse problem. Female offenders are also more likely to be in poor health than male offenders, which is related to poverty and long histories of substance abuse (Richie 2001; Bloom et al. 2002; Bloom 2003).

Consistent with existing research on female offenders, the women in my study were socially and economically marginalized. All but two of my respondents had little family support prior to prison, a finding that supports existing literature and is not surprising given their histories of childhood abuse. All but two were unemployed at the time of their arrest and only two had completed high school.

In addition, the majority struggled with depression and anxiety or had been diagnosed with a bipolar disorder or schizophrenia. Some residents, like Jennifer, had turned to illicit substances to cope with depression. Others believed that their addiction was related to abusive histories. Laura, for example, said she had used because it "took the pain away." However, her economic marginalization was also related to her use; she

took drugs when she lived on the streets because, “it would keep me up all night and I wouldn’t have to go to sleep and maybe get hurt.” Regardless of the reasons attributed to their addiction, during the time I was conducting my study, all but two residents had struggled with substance abuse in their past.

As scholars have documented, the increase in female prisoners is largely the consequence of the “war on drugs” and the increasingly punitive responses to addiction. Likewise, most of the women in my study had spent time in prison because of their addiction and the lifestyle that accompanied it. But their incarceration was often also related to abusive intimate relationships. For example, Jennifer became dependent on an abusive man after she lost everything because of her addiction. She recalled spending many nights “on the streets” after her boyfriend kicked her out of the room they shared. When this happened, she’d sometimes ride the subway to stay warm in the evening. Eventually she accumulated a number of citations for riding the subway for free. She was put on probation and then she was put in prison because she could not afford to complete community service, which was a term of her probation.

Although most residents were using drugs at the time of their crimes, there was one important exception. Erica, who was involved in a violent relationship, went to prison for stabbing her fiancé in self-defense. Although they had both been injured in the altercation, and although he was released from the hospital the same day, the district attorney proceeded to charge her with attempted murder. She eventually signed a plea bargain and spent seven years in prison. Erica differs from the “average” female offender



in that she had a job, had attended some college, and was not under the influence of drugs or alcohol during the commission of her crime. Even so, her experience is not unlike the experience of other women whose victimization remains invisible in a court of law (Leonard 2002). As has been documented in past research, when women do commit violent crime, it is often against a spouse, ex-spouse, or partner and the woman doing so has usually been abused by him.

Taken together, the women in my study are similar to most female offenders with one important exception: none retained custody of their children after their time in prison and only one resident sought reunification with her children during the timeframe of the study. While research suggests that an important gender-specific factor that shapes reentry is reunification with children, the women in my study did not have custody of their children. This is likely due to the little familial support they received prior to and following incarceration, their lack of financial resources, and their long histories of substance abuse.

## **Reentry**

Given the background of the residents of SECOND CHANCES, it is not surprising that most arrived at SECOND CHANCES because they left prison with no place to go. Travis (2005) and Petersilia (2003) have highlighted housing as the most immediate need that recently released prisoners face. Yet prison administrators and staff rarely address this need during pre-release planning (Petersilia 2003). In fact, many prisoners do not participate in pre-release planning and the number has declined of late

due to tighter state budgets (Travis 2005). Fortunately, many prisoners are able to live with their families during reentry, though the arrangements are often temporary or unstable, which is problematic. In one study, female parolees who experienced unstable living arrangements were significantly more likely to fail on parole (Schram et al. 2006).

As will be discussed in more detail in chapter 4, most of the former women prisoners in my study were either released to the streets or to a residential drug treatment program.<sup>3</sup> In interviews, they commented on how ill-prepared they felt for life outside of prison due to the lack of training and rehabilitation available to prisoners. As Jennifer stated, “The more time you do in prison, the worse you’re going to get. They’re not doing any helpful stuff in there.” Erica stated:

There’s no rehabilitation going on. There’s no classes. There’s no structure. There’s no therapy. There’s no help whatsoever. They’ve taken away most of the trades that you can learn. They’ve done away with it. So what do you do? You just sit there; you sit there in your cell. And what happens to a caged animal? You get crazy.

Research suggests that such experiences are common among prisoners, though female inmates have access to fewer treatment programs, education and job skills training than male inmates (Bloom 2003). Research shows that existing programming is insufficient to provide women with the skills they need to succeed on the job market once they are released (Schram et al.2006; Reisig et al. 2002; Richie 2001). Among women who struggle with alcohol or drug addiction, the stress associated with leaving prison without

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<sup>3</sup> One respondent reserved a space at a residential treatment facility prior to leaving prison; but left the day she arrived because her roommate threatened her. Another planned to live at a residential treatment program but did not because

sufficient support or preparation often leads to substance abuse, which decreases their ability to successfully reintegrate into society (Brown and Bloom 2009).

Additionally, many offenders return to disadvantaged communities with limited options for employment (Petersilia 2003). Likewise, SECOND CHANCES is located in a community where the median family income is 50% of the city's median income (United States Census Bureau 2000). Aside from jobs in fast food or small retail shops, there are few employment opportunities in the immediate area. Thus, the women in my study are competing for a limited number of jobs, and the jobs that do exist pay minimum wage.

These women also face potential employer discrimination due to their race as well as their criminal record, which further narrows their employment opportunities. The stigma of a criminal conviction is a formidable barrier to reentry for former prisoners (Travis 2005). Studies show that employers are less likely to hire ex-convicts than those who are not ex-convicts. In fact, employers are more likely to hire welfare recipients or applicants with little work experience than those with a criminal record. This effect is compounded when one considers that the majority of female offenders are women of color, which research shows are more likely than their white counterparts to be subject to employer discrimination (Browne and Misra 2003).

Nelson et al (1999) assert that family support is critical to determining the employment outcomes of former prisoners. In their qualitative study, having a supportive family was correlated with employment and sobriety. In addition, offenders with strong family support were less likely to commit new crimes. Likewise, in an interview-based

study conducted by researchers at the Urban Institute returning offenders viewed family support, defined holistically to include emotional and financial support, as an important factor that would impede the likelihood of their return to prison (Travis 2005).

Out of the studies conducted through the Urban Institute, the study based in Texas identified differences between male and females as they integrated into the community (LaVigne and Kachnowski 2005; Opsal 2008). The researchers found that women reported less familial support before and after incarceration and they had more family members who were addicted to drugs and alcohol. The female respondents in their study were more likely to report being harassed or hurt by family members prior to their prison terms and they were less likely than men to return to their mother's home after release. Women were also more likely to report wanting help than their male counterparts.

Several studies have since been conducted with all-female samples, and these suggest that that the female reentry process differs from the male experience of reentry (Opsal 2008). Men and women face similar concerns with regard to attaining employment and overcoming educational deficits. But compared to their male counterparts, female ex-convicts have greater difficulty securing safe housing, have less familial support before and after incarceration, have longer histories of substance abuse histories, are more likely than males to have mental health and physical health concerns, and are more likely to assume full care of their children after prison (Bloom et al. 2002).

The former female prisoners in this study did not just experience a few of these challenges. Rather, most residents experienced disadvantage in every realm of their lives.

They lacked alternate housing arrangements; nearly all had long histories of substance abuse; they faced physical and mental health issues; they had little-to-no employment history and the majority had not completed high school. In addition, most had been physically and/or sexually abused throughout their lifetimes, both by family members and significant others. And although prior studies suggest that the desire to be a good mother is a motivating factor for many female offenders to avoid crime and obtain employment, the women in my study had previously lost custody of their children. Although most parolees are disadvantaged, these women are among some of the most economically and socially marginalized.

The way in which parolees navigate through reentry when isolated from virtually all forms of support has yet to be explored, but scholars have suggested that a halfway house may provide the assistance such parolees are lacking. In the section that follows, I discuss the scant literature on halfway homes and provide an overview of what we know about residential treatment facilities for women.

### **Shifting Control to the Community: Residential Treatment Facilities**

One way to assist women prisoners as they reintegrate into the community is to offer a transitional living facility<sup>4</sup> that would provide free room and board, emotional support, and information on community resources. As explained by Abadinsky (396), “the halfway house provides (1) assistance with obtaining employment, (2) an increased ability to use community resources and (3) needed support during the difficult initial

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<sup>4</sup> Also called a halfway house or community reentry center (Petersilia 2003)

release period.” In addition to free room and board, SECOND CHANCES, is mandated by the Department of Corrections to offer job training and placement, substance abuse treatment, and counseling. However, as I discuss in chapter 3, many of these goals are not met.

Similarly, although halfway houses have been touted as beneficial for former prisoners reentering society, little research exists to support this claim and the few studies that do exist were completed on small samples several decades ago (Travis 2005). An important exception is a study based on a day reporting center in Chicago (Petersilia 2003). Although released inmates do not live at the facility, they do report to the center on a daily basis. Ex-inmates participate in a variety of programs including anger management, family reintegration and employment training. The results of the program evaluation were promising; rearrest rates of a comparison group were higher than those involved in the center. It was estimated that the program saved \$3.6 million tax dollars over 3 years by reducing participants’ rearrest rates.

Despite this, the number of halfway houses designed for prisoners has declined considerably; as of 2001 only 25 states utilize them to facilitate the reentry of former prisoners (Travis 2005). Among the states that use halfway houses, only 15,144 inmates resided in them. Part of the difficulty with establishing reentry facilities has to do with community reaction (Petersilia 2003; Travis 2005). Based on a national public opinion poll, three-quarters of respondents agree with the idea of a halfway house but less than one-quarter want a halfway house located in their neighborhood. Melinda, the director at

SECOND CHANCES, experienced community resistance in the past when she applied to add more rooms to the house.<sup>5</sup> Helen, the social work supervisor, believes that people know that SECOND CHANCES is a “house for women” but not that it’s a house for women on parole. In fact, they’ve refrained from hanging signs outside to indicate that it is a halfway home; it is thus indistinguishable from other homes in the neighborhood except for the number of women who come and go throughout the day.

While few halfway homes exist, the number of community correctional facilities has increased (Maidment 2006). Whereas halfway homes are designed to assist women who have already spent time behind bars, community correctional facilities enable women to “serve their time” in a residential treatment program rather than in a prison environment. While this is true for male and female convicts, the growth in research on female prisoners has led to gender-responsive interventions, which claim to be based on an awareness of victimization as a starting point for women’s treatment (Hannah-Moffit 2004).

Thus, for a growing number of women, “doing time” often involves counseling sessions, ongoing drug tests, and being mandated to participate in rehabilitation or self-help programs in the community (Haney 2010:15). While advocates propose that community corrections is less punitive and controlling than prison environments, some scholars have argued that these rise in these agencies merely, “signify a shift in how state regulation is conceptualized and practiced” (Haney 2010). More specifically, while many of these facilities are run by nonprofit organizations that claim to empower women,

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<sup>5</sup> Her request was eventually approved.

it would be a mistake to assume that this represents state retrenchment; rather “government from a distance has created an environment of state hybridity” (Haney 2010: 16). Maidment (2006:127) explains:

The treatment services and housing arrangements made available to...prisoners are heaped onto the private sector, largely free of state regulation and inspection, and are more often than not pressured into conforming to state-based ideologies. This amounts to little more than the ‘re-packaging of misery’ and it is scarcely surprising to learn that decarceration in practice has displayed remarkably little resemblance to liberal rhetoric on the subject.

Indeed, research by feminist scholars indicates that the daily operations of these agencies often focus on individual failings and thus resemble traditional punishment models.

For example, Goodkind studied two residential treatment programs for at risk girls. She found that “commercialized feminism” was the central organizing principle in the programs, which is characterized by, “its focus on the individual, self-reliance, and personal responsibility for change” (Goodkind 2009:397) In her study, the program directors and staff conveyed what they thought of as “feminism,” by teaching their young charges that they have power over their own destinies and by underscoring their “worth” through messages aimed at increasing the girls’ self-esteem. Goodkind argues that such messages cloak the structural realities of the majority of the young women who enter the criminal justice system and as such do little to address the reasons why girls come under correctional surveillance in the first place.

Likewise, Hannah-Moffit (2001) discusses the irony of offering empowerment programs in a system that strips women of their freedoms. She argues that the state has alleviated itself of responsibility for reform by focusing on the ways in which women



should reform themselves. She explains, “Previous welfare penal strategies of rehabilitation viewed the state as responsible for reforming the offender; in contrast, this empowerment strategy makes the offender responsible for her own rehabilitation” (172). This approach supports state goals of controlling, disciplining, and regulating the behavior of marginalized women, who are thought to have no one but themselves to blame; the discourse of personal responsibility is a dominant one within both welfare and penal systems in the United States (Haney 2004).

A focus on personal responsibility does not necessarily lead to a lack of power. In Haney’s (2010) ethnographic study of two female correctional facilities, a discourse of need and a discourse of desire led to very different programs and consequences. In her study of a group home for incarcerated teen mothers, attempts to break women of their “dependencies” enabled women to articulate what their rights should be. In contrast, a community correctional program for incarcerated mothers focused on their “dangerous desires,” which encouraged women not only to blame themselves but also to collude with staff against other inmates. Perhaps more importantly, the therapeutic model failed to equip women with skills, such as job training, that could be used for survival after prison.

It is important to note that these studies are based on community correctional facilities, and that there are similarities and differences between transitional living facilities and community correctional facilities. The key difference between community corrections and halfway homes is that inmates residing in these programs are still “doing time.” Yet, like community correctional facilities, SECOND CHANCES is funded by

the state, and as such, must abide by state regulations, which contextualize the experiences of the women residing within them. In addition, women at SECOND CHANCES are on parole; meaning they have been conditionally released from prison but may be returned to prison for committing new crimes or violating the terms of their parole. Thus, women in community correctional facilities and women residing at SECOND CHANCES are subject to the control of the state correctional system. However, as will be discussed in Chapter 3, women at SECOND CHANCES are subject to more social control than those who are released to a private residence whereas women in community corrections are thought to have more freedoms because they are not in prison. Moreover, because the halfway house must abide by the rules of the DOC, much of the staff's time is consumed with monitoring the behavior of parolees. Limited funding, coupled with DOC regulations, results in an agency that offers free room and board in exchange for personal freedoms.

Existing studies have been based on ethnographic observations of community correctional facilities, yet none have interviewed prisoners to find out how they experience these facilities. In this study, I address this gap in the literature by using a mixed methods approach which enabled me to observe the daily operations of the house *and* highlight residents' perception of SECOND CHANCES. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, although the house exhibited significant social control over the lives of the residents, and although most frequently complained about the rules, they nevertheless felt that living at SECOND CHANCES was a "blessing," and they hoped that the state would fund similar houses for others on parole.

## **Under the Eye of the Agency and the Parole Agent**

If former inmates could access support from those outside the halfway house, the limited services offered may not be problematic. Initially, parole officers provided counseling and linked former prisoners with community resources (Petersilia 2003). Inmates who were released conditionally were thus able to access forms of support, while at the same time, community members knew that someone was holding inmates accountable for their actions.

Many scholars now assert that the institution of parole is no longer concerned with assisting offenders during reintegration. According to Feeley and Simon (1992), the criminal justice system is less concerned with rehabilitation than it is with the management of offenders. This “new penology” means that offenders are subject to heightened levels of surveillance from agents whose primary responsibility is to manage “risky” populations. Consequently, parolees are at a greater risk of being returned to prison, but not necessarily for the commission of new crimes, and are less likely to receive assistance during reentry.

The extent to which the “new penology” represents a philosophical shift has been debated, but most scholars assert that the institution of parole is far less concerned with rehabilitation in comparison to previous decades (Opsal 2008). According to the Hoover Commission of 2003, 88% of our parole dollars is spent to track down parolees for “technical violations,” rather than providing services and support to them. High recidivism rates in the state of this study reflect the tendency for parole agents to revoke

parole due to technical violations as opposed to new crimes (Travis 2005).<sup>6</sup> Yet some studies suggest that some parole officers remain dedicated to rehabilitation and provide tangible and emotional support during reentry (Lynch 2000). In contrast, Opsal's (2008:198) study of 42 women on parole revealed that respondents, "clearly experienced parole as a method of surveillance rather than as a tool to assist them in their reintegration efforts."

With the exception of Opsal's (2008) study of women on parole, researchers have neglected to investigate parole from the perception of those who are subject to it. In her study, respondents viewed agents as similar to law enforcement officers who could revoke their freedom at any time. In my study, residents described their parole agents primarily as apathetic or unhelpful, although a few respondents believed that their agents had been emotionally supportive and one identified several ways in which her parole agent had offered practical assistance to her. This suggests that there has not been a holistic or universal shift to the "new penology." Parole agents still exercise discretion, which results in very different, and unequal, experiences of parole.

### **Overview of Remaining Chapters**

Previous research on female offenders suggests that most women who enter the criminal justice system have experienced profound abuse, have few skills or resources to draw upon, and have little familial support before and after release from prison. Much work has focused on offending mothers, which is understandable given the effects of

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<sup>6</sup> Technical violations are violations of the terms of parole. For example, parole can be revoked for missing an appointment with a parole officer, spending time with other parolees, or submitting a dirty drug test.

incarceration on children and the number of offenders who are children's primary caregivers. However, this study is dedicated to learning more about the experiences of women ex-convicts who, by virtue of long, troubled pasts, have lost custody of their children and have few sources of familial support.

In addition, this study focuses on the experiences of former female prisoners who live in a halfway house. Scholars have suggested that halfway houses can reduce recidivism by providing crucial support to parolees immediately following their release from prison, but little research exists on these facilities. Given the extreme disadvantage that characterizes the lives of most female offenders, a halfway house could be an important element of the reentry process. Yet far from "empowering" women, existing ethnographic work on community correctional facilities suggests that staff focus on individual shortcomings, thereby ignoring the social structural inequities that shape their paths to prison. Research on parole agents also suggests that the focus has shifted from helping offenders overcome barriers during reentry to monitoring their behavior. While previous research has primarily relied on ethnographic observations, this dissertation utilizes interviews with residents in order to understand how they experience their time at SECOND CHANCES and how they characterize their agents' role during reentry. I also interviewed social work interns in order to learn more about their perception of the challenges women on parole face

My methodological choices are discussed in Chapter Two. In the following chapter, I consider the strengths and limitations of my research design, and the

methodology upon which it was based. I also discuss the reasons why I chose to observe SECOND CHANCES and how those observations informed the interview schedule and the foundation for this study. My central purpose in interviewing women was to center their experiences, given that researchers have traditionally relied on male samples in studies on offenders.

In Chapter Three, I draw on ethnographic and interview data to discuss the daily operations of SECOND CHANCES and what residents find helpful or troublesome about SECOND CHANCES. Consistent with existing research on the role of parole officers, my observations suggest that the halfway house functions to supervise its residents, but does little to assist former female prisoners as they reenter society. Yet in their narratives, these ex-convicts nevertheless identify emotional benefits to living at the house and suggest that the state should fund more houses like SECOND CHANCES. Thus, while existing ethnographic research suggests that staff focus on individual shortcomings, my respondents did not feel that staff were critical of them. Instead, respondents viewed staff as an important source of emotional support, which helped to ease their transition out of prison. However, those who expressed the most gratitude for the opportunity to reside at SECOND CHANCES tended to be those who were unable to meet their basic needs, which likely influenced their perception of SECOND CHANCES.

Social and economic marginalization led most residents to SECOND CHANCES, as discussed in Chapter 4. In this chapter, I utilize interview data to reveal the experiences of women immediately before and immediately after release from prison, the

role of parole agents during this transition, and the paths that led respondents to SECOND CHANCES. Similar to my findings in Chapter 3, parolees who characterized their agents as helpful tended to focus on emotional, but not tangible, forms of assistance. In Chapter 4, I suggest that the discretion afforded to parole agents means that the reentry process will likely vary for parolees. More specifically, my respondents reported different experiences on parole and their perceptions tended to be related to who their agent was. Differences in their evaluations of agents were also shaped by their expectations of what a parole agent's role should be and whether or not they had been treated poorly in the past by state officials, friends, or family.

In Chapter 5, I incorporate the perspectives of social work interns, who were responsible for facilitating the residents' navigation into the community. Their assumptions at the beginning of their internship were similar to those that shape the dominant discourse on crime and the assumptions found in prior research on community correctional facilities staff (McCorkel 2003; Haney 2010); they felt that the residents were personally responsible for their actions and could succeed on parole if they made an effort. In contrast, the house director and intern supervisor believed that societal disadvantage led many women to SECOND CHANCES. I found that the interns' assumptions about the residents changed; by the end of the internship they identified a number of challenges like poverty and a lack of education that impeded their clients' ability to successfully transition into society. This chapter suggests that caseworker assumptions are dynamic and related to micro interactions with their supervisors and clients, whereas prior research focuses on how staff's assumptions are shaped by broader

shifts in state policy and the discourses surrounding those policies. Finally, I conclude my study by discussing the contributions of this research as well as policy recommendations.



## **CHAPTER II**

### **THE TOOLS AND THE TECHNIQUES OF DATA COLLECTION**

#### **Introduction**

In order to learn about the reentry process for women, I combined ethnographic observations of a halfway house for women on parole in a southwestern state with in-depth interviews with its clients and staff. Halfway houses have been touted as a way to reduce recidivism rates by offering housing and reentry services to parolees, yet research to support these claims is lacking. My case study of this halfway house provides new insight into the challenges that former female prisoners face during the reentry process and the extent to which halfway house staff can help or hinder their reintegration into society. In this chapter, I describe the setting for this ethnography, my field research, as well as the interview process. After describing the steps I took to analyze the data, I conclude with the limitations of this study.

#### **Feminist Methodology**

As discussed in chapter 1, women's experiences on parole have remained largely unexplored (for exceptions, see Leverentz 2006; Dodge and Pogrebin 2001; O'Brien 2001; Richie 2001). Although a significant body of literature focuses on reentry, very little work has been dedicated to positioning women at the center of this research (Opsal 2008). As a scholar dedicated to feminist research, my methodological choices were based on the desire to, "shift the focus of standard practice from men's concerns in order to reveal the locations and perspectives of all women" (DeVault 1999:30).

The methods I used for this study are not unique to feminist research, but this work is grounded in distinctly feminist methodology. Devault (1999), in her review of feminist methodology, highlighted the criteria upon which feminist methodology is based. First, feminists seek to, “find what has been ignored, censored, suppressed, and to reveal both the diversity of actual women’s lives and the ideological mechanisms that have made so many of those lives invisible” (Devault 1999:30). While feminist research has sought to capture women’s experiences, it has not always been attentive to the full range of female experience. At times, this has resulted in the presentation of a “universal” women’s experience, which obscures the influence of race, class, religion, and sexuality on women’s lives and women’s diversity (Acker 1999; Lorde 2000). Feminist methodology holds researchers accountable to recognize this bias and there is a growing body of literature that emphasizes the role of multiple forms of oppression in shaping women’s lives, especially inequalities based on race, class, and sexuality (Collins 1990:225; Baca Zinn and Dill 1994). However, as has been discussed, women who are disadvantaged because of their criminal status have rarely been the focus of research. In accordance with feminist methodology, this research highlights the interlocking oppressions that contextualize the experiences of women on parole.

Feminist methodology is also based on the desire to level hierarchies between the knower and the known (DeVault 1999; Cotterill 199). Oakely (1981) asserts that the researcher should share knowledge and experience, and offer support when it is requested by their research subjects. As a collaborative effort, feminist research should also strive to produce work that may lead to change that would benefit women (DeVault 1999). A

primary goal of this dissertation was to learn about the barriers to reentry from the women who experienced them in order to advocate for programs and policies that would benefit women as they exit prison. This study is thus grounded in feminist methodology and is a response to Greene, Haney and Hurtado's (2000) call for more qualitative research that enables incarcerated women to speak for themselves. They argue that we can learn more about women's needs if we ask them, and that, if they were taken seriously by those in power, their suggestions would provide more relevant services to women during and after prison.

## **METHODS**

Given that the aim of this research was to learn about the reentry process from the perspective of female offenders, it was necessary to engage in field research. I therefore utilized an ethnographic approach coupled with semi-structured interviews of women at SECOND CHANCES, a transitional living facility, or halfway house, for women on parole. Stacey (1988:22) defines the ethnographic method as the "intensive participant-observation study which yields a synthetic cultural account." She states:

Like a good deal of feminism, ethnography emphasizes the experiential. Its approach to knowledge is contextual and interpersonal, attentive, like most women, to the concrete realm of everyday reality and human agency. Moreover, because in ethnographic studies the researcher herself is the primary medium, the "instrument" of research, this method draws on those resources of empathy, connection, and concern that many argue should be germinal in feminist research. Ethnographic method appears to provide much greater respect for and power to one's research "subjects" who, some feminists propose, can and should become full collaborators in feminist research.

Based on a review of the literature, I knew that most female offenders had experienced multiple forms of oppression in every realm of their lives. During reentry, these disadvantages are accentuated as a consequence of a criminal conviction. Largely invisible in sociological literature and disregarded by most in society, this method enabled me to interact directly with and to provide emotional support and assistance to a group of women who were marginalized by their social location and criminal status (Flavin 2001).

In my interactions with residents of SECOND CHANCES, I learned a great deal about the hardships the residents had endured before and after incarceration and I observed the staff<sup>7</sup>, social workers, and interns at SECOND CHANCES respond to the residents in a variety of ways. These interactions and observations ultimately shaped the questions that I asked during semi-structured interviews with residents and social work interns. Like Richie (1996:17), who interviewed battered, African-American women detained in jail, I felt it was important to “learn from the women themselves rather than approach the interviews with rigid pre-conceived notions.” Additionally, researchers still know little about how women experience the transition into society, thus spending time at SECOND CHANCES prior to interviewing my research subjects enabled me to ask questions that I would not have otherwise considered.

Another reason I felt it necessary to begin this research as a participant researcher is because female offenders have often had their trust violated, both by state actors and in

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<sup>7</sup> Six women were employed as “monitors” at SECOND CHANCES. Their role was to enforce the house rules and provide assistance to the residents. As I discuss in chapter 3, most of their time was spent monitoring the residents. Although I sought interviews with staff, none accepted my request.

personal relationships.<sup>8</sup> I saw no reason why they would or should feel comfortable enough with an “outsider” to freely discuss their experiences, especially given the stigma attached to being a “criminal” woman. As Helen, the intern supervisor, said to me, “Most of the women feel ashamed because they’ve been labeled “felon, addict, bad mom, rotten daughter.”

This is not unlike the way in which Caputo (2008) approached her research on criminal pathways into sex work and shoplifting. She interviewed women who she’d developed relationships with, while hanging out at a halfway house.<sup>9</sup> She reports:

The women remarked on how I was different from other researchers wanting information from them. They rarely talked to the others and when they did, they gave only those details that would not make them feel vulnerable. With my continued presence at the halfway house, I gained their trust and acceptance. I tried hard to show them in my words and mostly in my actions that I am not better than they, that I care about them, that this book is about them, for them; it is their book.

Likewise, my presence at SECOND CHANCES enabled me to convey my care for the residents and my desire for their success and happiness. In my role as a social work intern, I was able to provide emotional and tangible assistance. In the section that follows, I discuss the setting for this study and my role as an intern. I then discuss the interview process and the data analysis.

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<sup>8</sup> The majority of residents, like female offenders more generally, had experienced abuse. They’d also had their children taken by social workers who claimed the desire to “help” them.

<sup>9</sup> Her study was not about the halfway house or reentry. She focused on turning points that led to specialization in particular crimes.

## **Entering SECOND CHANCES**

SECOND CHANCES is a non-profit corporation, funded by the Department of Corrections (DOC) in a southwestern state. As a transitional living facility for women on parole, all residents must be on parole and referred by their parole agent. Fifteen women can reside at the house at any given time. Residents, who can stay for a period of one year, do not have to pay for rent or utilities and they do not have to purchase food or toiletries. These items, as well as staff salaries, are covered with the \$1,500 dollars per resident per month that is sent to SECOND CHANCES by the DOC.<sup>10</sup> In addition, the agency offers to residents assistance with job skills, educational achievement, counseling, family reunification, and drug and alcohol treatment. It is important to note that this is not a community correctional facility, in which women are serving time for a crime in a community setting. All SECOND CHANCES residents have served time behind bars prior to their arrival.

However, to say that they have “served their time” is not to imply that they are free. As parolees, their freedom is always tenuous. They are released from prison prior to the completion of their sentence and are under the supervision of a parole agent. A parolee must abide by the terms of parole, which include finding a job, staying sober, seeking treatment, residing in a stable environment, seeking permission prior to travel outside the county, avoiding contact with other parolees, obeying the law, and meeting with the parole agent when he or she specifies. If any of the terms of parole are violated,

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<sup>10</sup> I was not granted access to the accounting records, so I do not know exactly how the money was spent.

a parolee can be sent back to prison. However, in some cases, the parolee's violation is ignored, or the parolee is sent to a "program" instead of prison.<sup>11</sup>

During my time at SECOND CHANCES, three residents were mandated to participate in the program because of a parole violation: Cindy, Mona, and Roberta. Cindy received a citation for prostitution. Mona was violated for traveling to a neighboring county. Roberta was violated for failing to report to her agent.<sup>12</sup> However, most of the residents at SECOND CHANCES were there voluntarily. This does not mean that they were necessarily happy with their living situation, but it does mean they had other choices with regard to where they could live.<sup>13</sup>

Parolees learned of the house from friends, community agencies,<sup>14</sup> or their parole agent. I heard of the house from a fellow graduate student,<sup>15</sup> who knew about my research plans and recommended that I contact SECOND CHANCES, which I did in the summer of 2009. Helen, a licensed clinical social worker and intern supervisor, called me within a week of my inquiry and asked questions about the nature of my research. I

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<sup>11</sup> In my observations, I heard agents refer to SECOND CHANCES as a treatment program, but little more than food and shelter was offered. On paper, SECOND CHANCES offered a host of services. According to the house director, there wasn't enough money to offer many reintegration services. It seems that many agents did not realize how few of the services were actually provided.

<sup>12</sup> Although this study includes observations of Cindy and Mona, only Roberta lived at SECOND CHANCES when I conducted interviews.

<sup>13</sup> Some residents complained about which room they lived in, who their roommate was, what was for dinner, the house rules, and how the staff treated them.

<sup>14</sup> A drug treatment program and a multiservice center for the homeless

<sup>15</sup> My friend wanted to volunteer at a program for female offenders and came across SECOND CHANCES in her search. She volunteered at a different program.

indicated my interest in learning more about the reentry process for women and she invited me to meet with the house director, Melinda, and herself.

As I approached SECOND CHANCES for the first time, I realized that it looked like many other houses on the street. As a two-story building, it was larger than the neighbors' homes, but there was no sign to indicate that it was a transitional living center. All of the homes on the street had been built in the 1920s and many looked as if they had been neglected or converted into multi-family units.<sup>16</sup> Visually, the area was in a state of disrepair and I surmised that many residents were poor, which I confirmed with census data.

When I arrived at SECOND CHANCES, I was escorted into the front room, which was set up as an office. This surprised me, because it lacked the feel of a "home" although it was indeed home to fifteen women. I cleared clothes out of a dining room chair and sat down across from the staff's desk, which was separated on all sides from the rest of the room by a wall that was about four feet high. The "monitor" busied herself with work. The room was cluttered with mismatched furniture and, like the outside of the house, it looked as if it had not been painted in decades. Papers were taped to the walls; many with discolored and curling at the edges. They announced safety procedures or the phone numbers to other community agencies. There were also handouts strewn on a table next to the front door that offered information on safe sex and sobriety. Above the table, a bulletin board displayed pictures of residents who had successfully completed a drug treatment program. A number of VHS cassettes from the 1990s were in a shelving

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<sup>16</sup> Peeling paint, rusty gates, unkempt yards, oil-stained driveways



unit against the back wall and across from the shelves were stacks of colored and printing paper. These visual cues led me to wonder if the house was underfunded and understaffed.

Helen and Melinda soon arrived and I followed them from the front room through the kitchen, into the back room, which had two large freezers, the washer and dryer, a dining table, couches, a television and three computers. We sat at the large circular oak table, which was covered with a plastic table cloth, and surrounded with mismatched chairs. The other side of the room had a small television, stained couches, and a table with computers and a printer.<sup>17</sup>

Melinda and Helen explained that most of the women arrived at SECOND CHANCES with the hope that they could make a fresh start, which Helen called the “honeymoon” phase. However, they soon became discouraged because of the multiple barriers they encountered, such as trouble finding employment, being rejected by family, and the difficulty of maintaining sobriety. I was told that they tried to give the women as much freedom as possible, unlike other halfway houses, and that they did this because of their feminist philosophy. They recommended that I spend time with the women as a social work intern, which would give me the opportunity to “hang out.” Helen explained that they would soon come to me for help, once they realized my role. Both felt that this would be the best way for me to learn about women on parole and I happily accepted. The social work interns, who were first year graduate students, would begin their assignment in September, and I was told to join them each Wednesday morning for

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<sup>17</sup> The computers did not work for the majority of my time at SECOND CHANCES.

supervision. In the meantime, I was welcome to come to SECOND CHANCES as often as I liked. I was instructed to report to the “monitor” in the front room, who would advise if there was anything in particular for me to do. If not, they told me to introduce myself to the residents and explain that I was there to help them with anything they needed. They figured most residents would understand my role, since SECOND CHANCES accepts social work interns from local universities year-round.<sup>18</sup>

The first day of my “internship,” the monitor gave me a tour of the rest of the house. Stairs led from the front room to the second level where most bedrooms, and an additional TV room, were located.<sup>19</sup> There was also a “clothes closet” where new residents could sift through clothes that had been donated over the years.<sup>20</sup> Many of the donations had been left in trash bags in piles on the floor, so I was asked to organize and throw out old, undesirable clothes. The monitor offered extra “hours” for residents who were willing to help me, and Kendra accepted the offer.<sup>21</sup> Before long, five residents were sifting through the clothes with me, picking out items that they did not realize were in the closet. A couple of residents asked if I had found any clothes that they could wear on business interviews. They “modeled” outfits, complimented each other, and we expressed excitement over “treasures” that were hidden in the back of the closet.

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<sup>18</sup> An intern arrived for her last day as I arrived for my first day.

<sup>19</sup> There was also a bedroom that led from the kitchen and one that led from the front room.

<sup>20</sup> New donations arrived three times over the course of my research. This was often a very exciting time for residents, though they occasionally argued over who would get what.

<sup>21</sup> At the time I didn’t know why Kendra would want “hours” but I later learned that they cannot leave on the weekends unless they have enough programming hours, which I discuss in the next chapter.

I concluded the day by shadowing the monitor. I noted that she distributed medications, held keys to all the rooms in the house, and that she kept all the kitchen knives behind locked in one of her desk drawers. A few residents asked me to let them into their rooms or the kitchen pantry. I also watched as she looked over the “weekend passes” that residents had submitted. After learning about the rules of the house, I spent most of my time with the residents, because of my interest in learning about reentry from their perspective. Moreover, I did not want to be closely associated with the monitors, because they were responsible for enforcing the house rules.

Thus, when I arrived the next week, I sought out the residents I had spent time with, asked how they were, asked what I could do for them, and I introduced myself to new residents. During introductions, I simply stated my name and explained that I was a student who wanted to help them with anything they needed. Residents were familiar with the role of a student intern because interns worked at SECOND CHANCES over the summer and during the preceding academic year, thus residents did not question my presence at the house and I did not reveal why I was there unless someone asked about my schooling. After they got to know me better, they would ask me questions about my life, and I would explain that my “program” was different than the other interns because I wanted to do research and teach rather than become a social worker.

This became my usual routine and enabled me to develop relationships with the women at SECOND CHANCES. Additionally, most residents talked about their days while smoking out on the patio, so I would regularly join them. I often spent an hour or

two in the afternoon sitting on the patio, listening to them talk about their days, their disappointments, their successes, and, sometimes, their irritation with the house rules.

The other interns spent most of their time in the back office, which was a small structure in the backyard, and I regularly joined them there. It had one computer, a printer, and a bulletin board where we wrote down our schedules and contact information. Although the internet didn't always work, when it did, I would help residents fill out job applications or paperwork for identification cards. However, there was not a set list of items we were expected to assist residents with, so our tasks varied depending on the "client's" requests. For example, Nancy, an intern, and I spent hours looking for a doctor or an agency that would assist an uninsured client with a neuromuscular disease, which we were ultimately unable to locate. Another intern and I tried to locate a resident's family, who she had lost contact with during her time in prison. Kelly, a resident, and I, sought volunteer opportunities so that she could acquire experience and thus build her resume. I also drove residents around the community: to their parole office, doctor's office, school, or to the store. In addition, as I developed relationships with residents, they would occasionally ask if we could talk in the intern office about what they were going through, so I was able to offer emotional support to them as well.

Importantly, because the interns and I worked part-time at SECOND CHANCES, I did not spend the same amount of time with each intern. I spent more time with Denise, Nancy, Cheryl, and Constance because of our schedules than with Yvonne or Elise. I

spent approximately 18 to 20 hours per week, usually over a three-day period, at SECOND CHANCES from September 2009 until mid-June 2010. I spent time with residents and interns on Tuesdays and Fridays, and usually only came to SECOND CHANCES on Wednesdays for supervision and to have lunch with the interns afterward. Although we were not always at the house together, we would email each other about “open items” throughout the week so that we would stay abreast of what had been and still needed to be accomplished with each resident.

Supervision lasted for two hours each Wednesday morning, and my observations proved to be a rich source of data. During supervision, interns would discuss who they had worked with, and what they had accomplished throughout the week, and they could ask questions about how to assist a specific client. Sometimes Melinda and Helen would ask us to assist residents with particular tasks; often these residents were new and Melinda knew of their case history because she had reviewed the case file that the parole agent brought when the resident arrived at the house. They would also discuss what they perceived as particular challenges the women faced: addiction, low educational attainment, lack of job prospects, and mental illness.

Although I was initially interested in the resident’s perception of reentry, as a participant observer, I became interested in the social control that contextualized life at SECOND CHANCES. I was also surprised by the critical and judgmental attitudes expressed by the interns, an issue I explore more fully in Chapter Five. Specifically, whereas Helen and Melinda seemed genuinely concerned about and committed to the

residents' success, I remained unsure about how that concern was channeled into words and actions that would benefit our clients. Thus, the focus of my study shifted and I decided to couple observations of the daily operations of the house with interviews with resident and interns in order to highlight the role of an agency designed to assist the women on their journey back into the community.

### **Interviews with Residents**

The social work interns were assigned to SECOND CHANCES for the academic year, which concluded in June. Given that the interview schedule was based on my observations, I wanted to learn as much as possible prior to the interviews, which is why I waited until June to conduct interviews. Therefore, during the last two weeks of their time at SECOND CHANCES, I engaged in interviews with five of the six interns and nine of the residents.<sup>22</sup> While I had always planned to interview residents, I chose to interview interns after witnessing their close interaction with them and their comments during supervision.

My goal with this research was to highlight respondents' experiences and perspectives, so it was necessary for me to engage in semi-structured interviews. Although the interviews remained semi-structured, the areas of inquiry changed as a consequence of my observations and interactions. For example, existing literature suggested that most women would have trouble finding work and reunifying with their children. However, most of the residents at SECOND CHANCES faced different

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<sup>22</sup> See Appendix A for a table of all participants with basic demographic information.

challenges. While they needed to support themselves, many had mental or physical disabilities that impeded their job opportunities. I therefore assisted them to apply for Supplemental Security Income instead of filling out job applications. Others were attending drug treatment and had not yet started the job hunt. None of the women had custody of minor children. Most had lost custody of their children and were not seeking reunification, had adult children living elsewhere, or had lost contact with their children. In contrast to prior research focusing on the role of employment and motherhood during reentry (Dalley 2002; O'Brien 2001; Harm 2001; Brown and Bloom 2009; Dodge and Pogrebin 2001), most residents were neither employed nor actively parenting a child. Moreover, while researchers have highlighted the marginalization that permeates the lives of female offenders, those who resided at SECOND CHANCES tended to be more disadvantaged with regard to family relationships, educational achievement and work history than what I expected based on existing research. The residents usually had long histories of substance abuse and homelessness as well. I therefore spent time during the interviews asking what challenges they had encountered after exiting prison as well as what they thought would make the transition easier rather than asking a list of questions that were not relevant to their experience.

Making the transition from intern to interviewer was fairly effortless. Neither interns nor residents seemed surprised when I asked to interview them. From the beginning, they knew that I was in a Ph.D. program. Interns knew I was completing research at the halfway house, but they did not know about the nature of my research. I simply stated that I wanted to know more about the reentry process for women and they

never asked additional questions. Residents knew I was in a “different” program than the other interns, but few asked questions about my “program.” Two residents asked how my program was different and I explained that my program was preparing me for teaching and research rather than for social work. Bernie, Susan, and Kelly asked if I taught college, to which I replied that I taught two courses. After that, Bernie and Kelly asked me for help in applying to college and Susan stated that she was impressed that I was a professor so young in life. Although I cannot say with certainty whether or not the residents thought differently of me than the other interns, I can say that they did not hesitate to ask me for help and that they seemed as forthcoming with me as with the others.

In order to recruit residents for interviews, I made an announcement one evening after the residents had returned from their day’s activities. I explained that I wanted to know about the challenges they faced on parole and what resources they thought would make that transition easier. I stated that my intention was to write their stories in my dissertation and hopefully suggest policy recommendations based on what they told me. I also offered the residents \$10 for participating in the study. They seemed pleased that someone wanted to know about their experiences and all but two residents signed up to be interviewed.<sup>23</sup> In fact, when I arrived at the house again, several residents approached me to find out when they could be interviewed.

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<sup>23</sup> At the time of the interviews, there were fewer than 15 women living at SECOND CHANCES. New residents were expected, but had not yet arrived.



Given the poverty of the residents, it is possible that they were anxious to participate so that they could acquire the stipend. This concerned me because I did not want the money to serve as a form of coercion. For this reason, I offered the payment at the start of the interview and explained that they could discontinue the interview at any time. Moreover, although I had concerns, I felt that it was important to offer the payment because prisoners have historically been “persuaded” to participate in research or expected to do so without receiving anything in return (Opsal 2008). Most residents seemed happy that they participated and that they received money just for “talking about my life.”

Interviews with residents were held in the interns’ office. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and four hours; the average length was two hours. I began the interviews by going over the letter of consent, reminding them that they could stop the interview at any time, and giving them the stipend. Given the powerlessness that pervaded their lives, I was concerned that they would think they had to answer all of the questions. For that reason, I emphasized that they were “in charge” of the interview. Two residents opted out of questions concerning the nature of their crimes but otherwise the residents seemed comfortable sharing their past and present views and experiences with me.

With the respondent’s permission, I used a digital recorder during each interview.<sup>24</sup> Some researchers have argued that the use of a recorder can make an interviewer less attentive and can make respondents feel “constrained by its presence”

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<sup>24</sup> None declined the recorder

(Opsal 2008:35). Others argue that using a recorder is beneficial because the interviewer can be fully engaged in the conversation (Bucher, Fritz, and Quarantelli 1956). Like Opsal (2008), I was able to concentrate more fully on my subjects' responses because of the recorder, but I did notice that one resident was cautious in her responses, which I attributed to its use. In fact, after the interview concluded, I thanked her for her participation, and she responded, "I've gone much deeper than that with you before, Stephanie."

Her hesitancy reinforced my belief that using a mixed-methods approach increased the quality of my research. Because I was able to combine interview and ethnographic data, I had a more holistic understanding of each resident's past and present. Additionally, I was able to include data based on observations and interactions with residents who left SECOND CHANCES before I conducted my interviews. For example, I had long talks with Kendra, Mona and Kelly but each left the house somewhat abruptly and did not leave contact information. Those who left were more likely to express discontent with the rules at SECOND CHANCES during our conversations, and to attribute their desire to leave facility due to the rules, which led me to include a section in the interview schedule regarding the rules of the house.<sup>25</sup>

### **Interviews with Interns**

The interviews conducted with interns proceeded similarly to those with the residents. As the end of the internship approached, I announced my desire to interview

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<sup>25</sup> See Appendix B for the staff interview schedule and Appendix C for the resident interview schedule

interns during supervision and explained that I was interested in their perception of the reentry process. After supervision was over, I asked each intern if she would be like to be interviewed for an hour or so before her last day at the house. Unlike the residents, the interns were concerned about the time commitment involved because they did not have much time prior to final exams. For this reason, all but one asked to be interviewed at the halfway house during regular intern hours. Denise met me at a local mall. Elise declined my invitation, explaining that she did not know what she would say and would feel uncomfortable answering my questions.

Intern interviews conducted at SECOND CHANCES took place in the interns' office. The average length of each interview was one hour. As with residents, I offered a \$10 stipend to the interns for their participation and I gave it to them at the start of the interview. Unlike the residents, they were concerned about where the money came from and did not want to accept it unless I had received special funding for my research.<sup>26</sup> I suspect that their concern was related to our common identity as students with few resources. All interns agreed to be tape recorded and did not seem concerned with the details of the letter of consent; which I attributed to the fact that they had been educated in research methods. In fact, Cheryl and Constance had assisted their professors over the school year with research and conveyed their sympathies to me for the length of time it would take to transcribe the interviews. At the conclusion of the interview, the intern

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<sup>26</sup> I did not receive funding for my research, but had enjoyed a fellowship which I explained to the interns; after which they accepted the stipend.

said that they were happy to help with my study and all expressed a desire for a change in “the system.”

The primary difference between the interviews with interns and residents is that the interview schedule for interns was primarily based on my observations. As will be discussed in Chapter 5, I noticed that the interns were concerned about client dependence and seemed unaware or unconcerned with the challenges associated with reentry, which was interesting given that their primary role was to help women overcome these challenges. This initially affected their interactions with the women, but during the second half of the internship, I noticed that the interns grew increasingly critical of the criminal justice system. Thus, during interviews, I asked questions about their initial perceptions of residents and how those had changed over time. Their interviews supported my observations. In addition, I asked about their perception of the house rules. These questions were based on existing research which finds that many caseworkers support the social control to which their clients are subjected. I incorporated such questions because I was interested in understanding if the interns supported the house rules or if they felt that they hindered the women’s successful reentry into society.

### **Data Analysis**

The interview schedule was informed by my ethnographic observations but the areas of inquiry were not immediately apparent. Instead these developed as I read and reread my field notes, looking for emergent themes and patterns. I wrote field notes throughout the day, but never in front of the residents. Instead, I recorded conversations

and observations in the intern office when I was alone. The exception was during supervision. As students, the interns took notes throughout our meeting, so it was not unusual for me to do so. Additionally, I digitally recorded observations on the drive home in order to reduce the likelihood that I would forget something. These verbal notes were later transcribed in the evenings. Following a modified grounded theory approach, I reviewed notes each night in an effort to identify new questions and emerging themes (Charmez 2001).

As discussed in Chapter 1, much of the previous research on female offenders is based on the pathways perspective. This research has highlighted the difficulty associated with juggling familial and work obligations following incarceration. Researchers have also discussed the ways in which the conditions of parole hinder successful reentry. However, in talking with residents at SECOND CHANCES, it became apparent that their experiences on parole were different, even though they had similar demographic profiles as parolees in other studies. For example, residents did not meet with parole agents once a month; instead they were under constant surveillance by the staff at SECOND CHANCES, which exposed them to a greater risk of sanction. At the same time, contrary to the agency's mission statement, there did not appear to be many tangible benefits associated with life at the house, aside from free room and board. Given the lack of support services and the number of rules at the house, I crafted an interview schedule designed to probe their perception of the rules and benefits of living at SECOND CHANCES. I added these questions to the original interview schedule and reduced the number of questions related to motherhood and paid work. However, I did

ask questions about those issues when a respondent drew attention to them or if I knew that a resident had sought employment or was in contact with her children.

Additionally, I soon learned that the rules were mandated by the funding source, so I located and reviewed literature on state-funded treatment programs, community correctional facilities, and client-caseworker interactions at such agencies. Like Opsal (2008:44) I, “used existing research and literature to focus in on particular ideas and make sense out of others.” The patterns that emerged coupled with existing literature led to the identification of the concepts that guided the interview schedule and framed this dissertation.

### **Relationship Building and Feminist Ethics**

In my study, the time I spent with the residents at SECOND CHANCES led to the formation of relationships and several residents referred to me as a “friend.” Sociologists who “orient themselves epistemologically within positivism” may criticize this study on the grounds that only “distant noninvolved researchers” can find the “truth about the social world” (Opsal 2008:23). However, I contend that involving oneself in the research process is unavoidable and I agree with Bhavnani (1993) that feminist objectivity “means being attentive to the limits of our knowledge claims.” As Collins (1990) argues, *what* we know is always a “partial truth” and is rooted in our particular standpoint.

Nevertheless, I was concerned about the “moral issues” embedded in methods that encourage friendship with respondents yet have the “potential to exploit them in order to gain source material” (Cotterhill 1992:595). Kirsch (1999:29) warns:

Interviews...can sometimes lead participants to divulge information against their better judgment, perhaps even against their will. Feeling the warmth, undivided attention and sincere interest shown by skillful interviewers (something we rarely experience in daily life), participants can easily reveal intimate details about their lives which they may later regret having shared.

Given that I had worked with the residents prior to the interviews, I was deeply concerned that the women might discuss aspects of their lives that they would not otherwise reveal. During the interviews, Janet, Jennifer, Enrica, and Mary tearfully discussed the path that led them to SECOND CHANCES. In fact, Mary revealed a feeling of shame about her post-incarceration experiences, explaining that she had never told anyone else about her time on the streets and probably never would. Therefore, I followed Opsal's (2008) lead and chose to distance myself from the "information gatherer" role. When a respondent had an emotional response to a question, I chose not to probe. Instead, I listened and let them share what they wanted to share.

Feminist scholars face a similar ethical concern when they engage in ethnographic research. Stacey (1988:23) asserts, "conflicts of interest and emotion between the ethnographer as authentic, related person (i.e. participant), and as exploiting researcher (i.e., observer) are an inescapable feature of ethnographic method." As an intern, I had listened to very personal stories of abuse, suicide attempts, and institutionalization that were not always repeated during interviews. The exclusion of these stories during interviews may have been because the respondent did not feel it was related to incarceration or reentry, or it could be that the resident did not want that part of her life included in my study. In deciding whether or not to include or exclude the personal details of a woman's life, I chose to include them only if excluding them resulted in a

distortion of the “ethnographic truth” of my study (Stacey 1988:24). Given that the interview schedule was built on an analysis of my field notes, I believe that excluding some of the data did not compromise the integrity of my study and that including it would have betrayed the trust of women who shared very personal stories with me.

### **Limitations**

Throughout this chapter, I have discussed the methods that I used to gather data. I have argued that they were selected based on the goals of this study. Although there are advantages associated with my methodological choices, there are also distinct limitations. First, many residents left SECOND CHANCES before I had the opportunity to interview them. Of the nine women I interviewed, only three were at SECOND CHANCES when I began my study. I did not originally realize that most residents did not stay for the full twelve months.

When I did realize that more residents left prior to the year’s end than stayed, it was not possible to overcome this shortcoming. When residents left the house, it was usually not a planned decision.<sup>27</sup> Based on the events that led to their departure or my conversations with them, it seemed that they left because of an altercation with staff, out of discontent with the house rules,<sup>28</sup> or because their first Social Security Disability Insurance check came in the mail and they no longer needed free shelter. Given that I was interested in the residents’ perspective regarding the benefits of, and rules associated

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<sup>27</sup> Or it may have been planned, but not advertised to staff or interns.

<sup>28</sup> These women tended to leave before I’d had a chance to interact with them. It often happened within a couple of days after being repeatedly told that they could not leave the house until 14 days had passed.



with, living at SECOND CHANCES, it would have been ideal to interview those who left in order to find out why they had left. This wasn't necessary in each case; some left the same weekend that they arrived and may not have been able to offer much insight regarding the halfway house. Nevertheless, there were a handful of residents who left abruptly after living at SECOND CHANCES for a number of months and their perspective would have been valuable given the goals of my study. Unfortunately I was unable to locate them after they left and was therefore unable to request an interview with them.

Some may argue that my own biases influenced what I perceived or how I interpreted interviewee responses and ethnographic observations. This is a shortcoming of qualitative data in general and I tried to keep my analysis as closely grounded in the evidence from my interviews and field notes as possible. Moreover, like many feminist researchers, I contend that a scientist cannot ever be completely objective with regard to her research (DeVault 1999). I agree with Caputo (2008:12), who stated, "Far from the confines of a desk and closed office door, I have entered into real life. One may envision, even expect, a researcher to be a dispassionate scientist. In my view, this is unnecessary and counterproductive."

Another shortcoming of this study is that it is not generalizable to all halfway houses or all former female prisoners. It is based on the experiences of women at one halfway house in one state. Yet reentry experience can vary depending on a number of factors such as the county's economy, the parole officer, the climate of the parole office,

or state laws and their enforcement (Opsal 2008). However, although this is a shortcoming of my research design, generalizability was not a goal I sought when I embarked on this dissertation research.

It is important to note that the time and location of my study may have influenced my findings. This study was conducted in a state in which many parolees are returned to prison for technical violations and this may have influenced my respondents' characterization of their parole agents. Additionally, the difficulty my respondents experienced when they sought employment may have been partially a consequence of the economic recession as well as employer attitudes toward former inmates. Lastly, it seems possible that women on parole in rural areas may face different challenges than my respondents. Specifically, the women in my study may have had greater access to supportive services since the house was located in a densely populated suburb.

Given that research on halfway houses and female parolees is virtually nonexistent, this research was exploratory in nature. I hope this dissertation inspires more studies of other halfway houses so that we can better understand how state-specific policies affect the operations of transitional living facilities. Additional studies would also reveal how my findings and conclusions compare to similar sites in other places.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **SECOND CHANCES TRANSITIONAL HOME:**

#### **A CHANCE TO BE SUCCESSFUL OR A SECOND PRISON TERM?**

##### **Introduction**

One of the primary purposes of this study is to highlight women's experiences on parole by listening to their stories of struggle and perseverance as they transition from prison to the community. Although there is a growing body of literature that seeks to understand the process of reentry for women, we still know relatively little about how some of the most socially isolated women navigate through their environments after having been separated from systems of support. Moreover, some women did not have systems of support to rely on prior to incarceration. How do those who do not have a single source of emotional or financial support experience reentry?

Scholars have suggested that transitional living facilities, or halfway houses, can offer parolees with safe, stable housing as well as programs that enable such women to access societal resources. Yet we know virtually nothing about halfway houses and the little we do know is based on quantitative analysis of non-residential transitional facilities. These studies suggest that halfway houses may reduce criminal activity (Petersilia 2003). In this chapter, I describe my observations of a halfway house designed to assist women for a year following their release from prison. I find that the mission of the house, to help women access resources and develop skills necessary for success, is

not accomplished because the funding source, the Department of Corrections, dictates the daily operation of the house through rules and regulations. Consequently, staff must spend most of their time monitoring the residents rather than assisting them with tasks like applying for employment or supplemental security income, or acquiring identification cards. I conclude by exploring how the residents perceive the benefits, rules and regulations of the halfway house. Before discussing my findings, I first put them into the context of previous research on women's transition out of prisons and into the community.

### **Challenges Women Face After Prison: Prior Research and this Study**

As the number of incarcerated people in this country grows, so has the number of studies that center the experiences of prisoners during reentry (Petersilia 2003; Travis 2005). These studies highlight the challenges that former inmates face with regard to employment, family reunification, sobriety, and the loss of civil liberties. In addition, scholars have discussed the effects of legal restrictions related to employment and access to public housing and welfare (Love and Kuzma 1997). However, as discussed by Opsal (2008:307), women have remained at the margins of this work, understood only as romantic partners to criminal men or as community members affected by high rates of imprisonment (Leverentz 2006). It wasn't until recently that women's post-incarceration experiences have been explored. A handful of qualitative studies have been particularly useful in understanding how women experience reentry (Opsal 2008).

One of the first studies dedicated to women's experiences after prison was completed by O'Brien (2001). She interviewed 18 women who had been released from prison for at least six months who self-identified as successful "in the free world." Their experiences underscore the importance of accessing stable, safe housing, steady employment, and the development or maintenance of healthy, supportive relationships with significant others, family members, children, program facilitators, and counselors.

According to Dodge and Pogrebin (2001), the difficulties women face during reentry constitute the "collateral costs of imprisonment." The researchers interviewed 54 formerly incarcerated women, who expressed that the stigma of a criminal label served to limit employment opportunities and negatively affected their interactions with community members. Without employment, and with few friends, family support was considered crucial to their emotional and physical well-being. Unfortunately, many had lost contact with family and engaged in self-deprecation over the loss of relationships with children and close relatives.

Richie's (2001) study also highlights the challenges women face following incarceration. Her respondents report that a lack of access to gender-specific drug treatment programs, physical health care concerns, persistent untreated mental health issues, low educational achievement, and few work opportunities impede their ability to become productive citizens of society. Most of the women faced competing demands and did not have the emotional or financial support to fulfill them. Richie reports that many women return to distressed communities that are ill-equipped to support their needs, and

argues that women need comprehensive services and economic development in their communities. Quantitative data on women parolees also points to the lack of resources that can be found in communities with high rates of returning women offenders (Huebner et al. 2010).

These studies underscore the importance of reunification with children for women offenders and how difficult that can be given the social isolation and poverty that most female offenders face. Yet there are other important ways in which women's reentry differs from that of men. Specifically, long histories of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse is often coupled with substance abuse (Bloom 2003; Bloom et al. 2002; Covington 2002); consequently, women often have less family support than men and are less likely to have romantic partners waiting for their return (Dodge and Pogrebin 2001). Women are also more likely than men to experience physical and mental health challenges (Bloom et al. 2002; Covington 2002; Richie 2001). All of these factors collide to create daily barriers that women must overcome in order to avoid becoming incarcerated again.

According to Petersilia (2003), an ideal way to assist offenders with the reentry process would be to release them to a halfway house. The term "halfway house" refers to a facility where the released offender lives, and where he or she receives supportive services from parole officers, social workers, and their families. This would serve the purpose of linking parolees to community resources, addressing skills and educational deficits, and building bonds with community members, while at the same time increasing community safety as a consequence of additional interaction with, and supervision of, the

former offender. While halfway houses are posed as a good alternative to releasing prisoners to the streets without oversight or assistance, data to support these statements is virtually nonexistent. This is probably related to the fact the number of halfway houses in existence is slight as compared to the number of prisoners released from prison each year.

Most of the research on community corrections investigates programs that offenders are mandated to enter as alternatives to incarceration, called community correctional facilities. Unlike community correctional facilities, a halfway house offers shelter and services to a person who has already spent time behind bars. While an individual on parole can be returned to prison, he or she often has the option of selecting his or her residence; thus, a halfway house can be voluntary and not necessarily a condition of parole.<sup>29</sup> Given that parolees can choose or request to reside at a halfway house, it stands to reason that the house would meet the needs of the residents, as opposed to subjecting them to the control that has been found in community correctional facilities (Haney 2010; O'Brien 2001).

Community correctional facilities were posed as ideal for female offenders for several reasons. For one, many women are incarcerated for crimes related to addiction or poverty as opposed to violent crimes. In addition, many female prisoners are the primary caregivers of minor children. Thus, an alternative to incarcerating low-level offending

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<sup>29</sup> A parole officer must approve the housing arrangements of a parolee. Thus, if a woman is considered at risk for recidivism, she may be required to live at Second Chances Transitional House, the facility this research is based on, or at a residential treatment facility. Women who were required to live at the halfway house included those who spent a lot of time in the "projects," those who submitted a "dirty" drug test, and those who missed an appointment with a parole agent.

mothers is to place them in a program designed to help them overcome addiction and other behaviors that landed them in the criminal justice system, while at the same time enabling them to maintain their caregiving responsibilities. Many of these facilities are founded on feminist ideals of empowerment. Yet research aimed at investigating community corrections for women has revealed that the facilities subject women to “therapeutic” techniques aimed at ridding women of their self-defeating behaviors and “dangerous” desires (Haney 2010). Consequently, acknowledgement of the structural conditions, such as the lack of legitimate employment opportunities in low-income neighborhoods, employers’ racial discrimination, and lack of affordable child care, that are related to women’s involvement in crime falls by the wayside and individual “empowerment” remains an elusive goal.

Since halfway houses are meant to help offenders transition from prison into the free world, we cannot assume that the residents’ experiences would be akin to those in community correctional facilities. O’Brien’s (2001) study of six women who were mandated to enter a halfway house for the final six months of their sentences is the only study that considers the experiences of women placed in a program after their prison term.<sup>30</sup> She found that the house both helped and hindered the reentry process. Some of the women reported disappointment with the continuous surveillance, lack of privacy, and unsupportive attitudes of staff. Time away from the house had to be “earned” which prevented women from immediately reconnecting with their children. In addition, the

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<sup>30</sup> In O’Brien’s study, the women experience more freedom than those who finish their term in prison. In my study, the women at the halfway house are subject to more social control than their counterparts on parole. The function and purpose of the two facilities is different.



women were forced to pay a subsistence fee, which interfered with their desire to save money for future expenses. However, most women valued the relationship they had made with one staff person, “Mr. G.,” whose encouragement and empathy helped them to abstain from drugs. One woman also highlighted the benefit of having time to find a job and save money prior to being on her own.

My study will compare these findings with the experiences of the women living at SECOND CHANCES, most of whom were living there voluntarily after leaving prison. SECOND CHANCES, the halfway house being investigated in this study, is a non-profit agency funded through the state. The state’s purpose in funding these facilities is to provide housing and transitional services to exiting prisoners on a non-sanctioned basis. This reflects the increasing trend for state policy to be implemented and interpreted in agencies contracted by the state. As stated by Haney (2010:16):

Through ‘partnerships’ with a variety of nongovernmental entities...the site of state policy has become more diffuse. Public partnerships with nonprofits and private companies have led to a multiplication of actors now playing the role of the state...they may appear to operate according to different logics...but they remain part of the state arena through their budgets, contracts, staffing, and legal mandates. In many ways, these agencies are akin to satellite states-they circle and hover around the centralized ‘mother ship,’ relying on her for material survival, legitimacy, and authority. Yet, on a day-to-day basis they claim autonomy from her.

SECOND CHANCES’ stated goals are to offer safe, stable housing as well as programs that enable women to access social resources. According to the mission of the house, this can partly be accomplished through cooperative, as opposed to hierarchical, relationships and by actively pushing for changes in the criminal justice system. The halfway house’s stated goal is to offer a better life for their residents, and they often

juxtapose themselves against the criminal justice system. However, the state nevertheless exerts a significant amount of power over the daily operations of the house, to the extent that the mission of SECOND CHANCES is not accomplished. Indeed, as I will argue more fully in this chapter, the house is more of an extension of prison than it is a facility that offers opportunity for advancement and growth. This is not the consequence of decisions by the staff but rather the lack of funding the state is willing to allocate to reentry projects, such as drug rehabilitation programs and employment and training programs. I argue that the state is paying “lip service” to supportive services. The state’s emphasis on surveillance over rehabilitation constrains the interactions between staff and residents and the kinds and levels of assistance that staff can provide to residents. Throughout the chapter, I include the perspectives of house residents, who identify both the positives and negative aspects of life at SECOND CHANCES. They identify free room and board and emotional support as the main benefits of the program but most residents thought that the rules hindered their ability to reunify with family and obtain employment. Those who were most critical of the house rules and derived the least benefit from living at the house tended to be more educated, have greater family support, and were less economically disadvantaged.

### **A Feminist Philosophy?**

When I first met Melinda, MSW, director of SECOND CHANCES, and Helen, the licensed social worker and intern supervisor, they described their philosophy as feminist and they acknowledged the structural conditions leading to crime. In their view, residents were there because of social disadvantages. Therefore, they tried to give the

women as much freedom as possible as opposed to following the rules dictated by the Department of Corrections (DOC). They contrasted their philosophy with that of another reentry program in which the director strictly enforced the DOC rules. Melinda claimed that what was most important for women on parole to make a successful reentry into society was to receive care and concern from the staff. In contrast, Helen emphasized the structural barriers to employment that these women faced, which were outside of the staff's control. She asserted that a significant barrier for residents was that employers discriminate against women who have felony records. In fact, she explained, African American felons have an even more difficult time accessing employment than white women.

My first meeting with Melinda and Helen exemplifies the way in which contradictory discourses coexist in state-funded agencies. Both social workers identified societal gender disadvantage as the cause behind women's placement at SECOND CHANCES. Yet Melinda identified the solution to this problem as being best addressed by providing residents with *emotional* support, whereas Helen discussed a *structural* barrier, access to employment, particularly for African American women. Unlike agencies that subscribe to "commercialized feminism," Helen asserted that women need equal access to employment in order to succeed, thereby suggesting the need for societal change. Noticeably absent from our conversation was a reference to clients as "dependents." Instead, Melinda suggested that women needed to develop emotional attachments to others. In addition, both social workers suggested that they breach, and therefore resist, the rules and regulations mandated by the DOC in order to provide

women a measure of freedom from state control. At first glance, this agency appeared to be a respite for women whose lives had been marked by extreme social control and disadvantage.

Yet several days later, on my first day as an intern, I was struck by how little freedom the women possessed over their personal movements, both within and outside the house. As I shadowed the “monitor,” it became apparent that the women had to ask permission for virtually everything. Residents were not permitted to have keys to anything in the house. Upon her return from the store, school, or a drug treatment program, a female resident had to ring the doorbell, sign- in, and ask to be let into her room. Women have to sign in and out every time that they leave and return to the house. The sign-in sheet includes where a woman was going, when she left, and when she will return. This serves as a snapshot of the activities of the women during shift change so that none of the residents “slip through the cracks,” or stay out later than expected. When a woman cooked, she had to ask for a kitchen knife, and to have the freezer and supply cabinet unlocked by the staff. As a precaution against drug abuse, all medications, prescription or otherwise, had to be doled out by monitors. All of the women were expected to submit to random drug tests, which involved peeing into a cup while the monitor watched, to ensure that the residents do not try to use someone else’s urine.

Likewise, women had to ask for permission to go places in the community, and while in the community, they had to remain in contact with the monitor. In order to leave the house, women had to fill out itineraries, indicating their method of transportation, the

address and phone number of their destination, and their arrival and departure times.<sup>31</sup> A deviation from the itinerary had consequences ranging from restriction, meaning the resident would not be permitted to leave for a period of time, to being kicked out of the house, to a violation of parole. As Whitney, a monitor, explained to me, a deviation from one's itinerary can be as simple as purchasing a soda from a 7-11 store, without prior permission. While out on an itinerary, women were instructed to call in at designated times and to return with proof of where they had been, which could be anything from a receipt to a signed form verifying their attendance at a program.

The rules governing weekend passes were more complicated. To leave overnight, the resident had to stay with her "sponsor," which could only be a blood relative who has been approved by the house parole agent. In order to complete the itinerary, the resident must have her entire weekend planned out by Thursday night,<sup>32</sup> including precise arrival and destination times. Over the weekend, the staff will make "surprise" calls to the sponsor's home to ensure the resident is where she said she would be, and the resident is given additional times to call and report to the staff. When she returns to SECOND CHANCES on Sunday evening, all of her belongings are searched to ensure that she does not have drugs or alcohol in her possession.<sup>33</sup>

An important point is that the rules and regulations at SECOND CHANCES were in addition to the regular terms of parole. The activities of parolees who are able to

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<sup>31</sup> Women were not permitted to go to places that did not have addresses, like the beach.

<sup>32</sup> The weekend pass had to be in by Tuesday if it was a holiday weekend or if the director planned to be out of the house at week's end.

<sup>33</sup> When a new resident arrives, all of her belongings are searched before she can go to her room. This is the first thing she experiences upon arrival, setting the tone for what's to come.

reside with a loved one are not monitored on a daily basis; most meet with a parole agent once a month. Thus, those who do not have a family or home to return to, and therefore reside at SECOND CHANCES, are subject to more social control than their more privileged counterparts. In order to have a roof over their heads, residents had to relinquish their freedom of movement.

Most of these rules, I would soon discover, were mandated by the funding source: the DOC. Consequently, much of the funding went toward monitoring the women's activities. The monitors were able to link women to community resources only as time permitted. That is, staff could only provide assistance after they had performed their primary duty of monitoring the women. Thus, while the stated mission of SECOND CHANCES was to help women access societal resources so that they could live independent lives, the rules dictated by the DOC significantly curtailed the ability of SECOND CHANCES to fulfill that goal. Moreover, while the value of free housing during the transition period after prison is a definite benefit for women on parole, providing a roof over one's head does not automatically enable that person to successfully reintegrate into society. As Petersilia (2003) and Travis (2005) have pointed out, at minimum, exiting prisoners also need employment and a source of emotional support. At SECOND CHANCES, the rules were often more visible than the forms of assistance provided. Monitoring of residents also negatively affected the relationships formed between staff and residents and reduced the time devoted to helping women to access employment and other community resources. The high level of surveillance of residents thus hindered rather than helped the reentry process.

## **Implementation of the Rules and their Consequences**

Numerous scholars have identified strong family support as critical to successful reentry as it helps to reduce recidivism. However, the house rules make visiting family members very difficult. In order for a family member to be approved as a sponsor, the person has to fill out paperwork and go through a criminal background check. Some family members do not trust “the system” and are wary of agreeing to a thorough background check or have their own criminal records. Others do not have easy access to all of the information that is required. For example, in order for Julie to have her brother approved as a sponsor, she and her brother had to pay for and wait to receive a copy of their birth certificates, which were be used to verify that they were blood relatives.

It was also difficult for Silvia to gather the necessary paperwork to visit her sister’s house. Silvia voluntarily came to the house shortly before Christmas and planned to spend the holiday with her sister. When she arrived, Melinda talked with Silvia for thirty minutes, during which time Silvia revealed her plans to visit her family over the holiday. During this conversation, Melinda did not inform Silvia that her sister would have to be cleared as a sponsor in order for her to stay at her sister’s house. Later that afternoon, Melinda called the house monitor to ask her to go over the clearance process with Silvia.<sup>34</sup> The monitor explained that Silvia would be unable to visit her family for Christmas unless the paperwork was submitted within the next day. When Silvia realized that she may not be able to see her sister, she grew very angry and called Melinda a “little bitch.” As Silvia saw it, Melinda had the monitor go over the most restrictive rule of them

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<sup>34</sup> I doubt that Melinda purposefully withheld this information. Given the lack of staff and many responsibilities Melinda has, it is likely that the clearance process slipped her mind.

all, instead of doing it herself. Moreover, since she was not sanctioned to the house, she knew she could leave at anytime, and she would do so if living in the house meant being subjected to rules she would not face elsewhere. She came to SECOND CHANCES because she heard they helped you get on your feet, but that was not her experience thus far.

When Silvia and I were alone, she told me that she had been looking forward to seeing her daughter and grandchildren, whom she had not seen since before she was incarcerated eight years ago. Her daughter lived several hours away, and had unreliable transportation, so she planned to meet them at her sister's house, which was closer to her daughter's residence than SECOND CHANCES. Throughout the course of the day, she called her sister several times, reminding her of the deadline and asking when she would complete the paperwork. Her sister explained that the reason the forms had not been returned was because she was working and could not leave work to get to a fax machine.

Silvia was serious about leaving SECOND CHANCES if her pass was not approved. She developed a back-up plan, which was to move to the city where her sister lived, and to stay in a shelter. Silvia explained that she had two sisters in the area, but neither had much money, which was also the reason she couldn't live with them, but that they would take turns bringing her a meal each day. She figured she could survive off the meals from her sisters plus the meal the shelter would provide. During the day, when she was not permitted to stay in the shelter, she would attend college.<sup>35</sup> Her willingness to live in a shelter as opposed to SECOND CHANCES, where free room and board were

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<sup>35</sup> Sharon had never attended college before, but decided she wanted to enroll after learning that she could go to community college for free with the Pell Grant.



provided, underscores how important time with her family was and it suggests that the house was perceived to be more of a barrier to reentry than a benefit. Silvia left within a few days of her arrival at SECOND CHANCES.

Natasha faced a similar situation. Like Silvia, Natasha's proposed sponsor was a low-income woman. Natasha's experience illustrates how class inequalities interacted with house rules to result in unequal opportunities to visit with family. She was unable to visit her grandmother because she did not have a phone connected to a landline and did not have the money to install one. Since rules specified that the parolee had to be contacted via a landline when visiting with a sponsor, Natasha's grandmother was not approved as her sponsor until Natasha saved enough money to pay for her grandmother's telephone line.

Another challenge faced by some residents was that their family had to be willing to submit to the same rules that governed the parolee. One rule that affected the sponsor was that SECOND CHANCES staff had the right to call the sponsor's house at any time of the day or night. This created a problem for Mona, whose sponsor was an elderly aunt. One Saturday evening staff called at 10 o'clock at night. Mona's aunt answered the phone and lectured the monitor for calling so late and waking her up. When Mona took the phone from her aunt, the monitor then lectured her, saying that she had the right to call at 2 am if she wanted. When Mona got off the phone, her aunt then lectured her about how she was inconvenienced when SECOND CHANCES called so late at night. Several days later, when Mona discussed the situation with me, she was still upset with SECOND CHANCES, asserting that that it wasn't her fault the aunt mouthed off to the

monitor, and that the monitor should not be upset with her for something the aunt said. After all, she explained, it is rude to call someone late at night.

Taken together, these examples suggest that the residents do not have equal opportunities to reunify with loved ones. Women who lost touch with their relatives often had pseudo families or close friends, but these individuals could not be their sponsors because they were not blood relatives. Those who faced the most difficulty reuniting with family members tended to be the most economically disadvantaged women. Poor women, for example, were not likely to have the means to purchase birth certificates required to establish that a potential sponsor was a blood relative. Sponsors had to not only be blood relatives, but ones that could pass criminal background checks and who would be willing to abide by the rules governing the parolee, and to have access to telephone landlines. Women who had tenuous relationships with family and those who had close family members with criminal convictions were thus negatively affected by the rules that governed weekend visits. However, women who had lost touch with family members were perhaps the most penalized, because they could not spend weekends away from SECOND CHANCES for the duration of their stay. One resident, who had been raised by the foster care system for part of her childhood, had family-like bonds with her ex-boyfriend's sisters, but because they were not related by blood, they were not approved as sponsors.

### **Consequences of Rule Violations**

Research suggests that ex-offenders experience discrimination because of their criminal history. Requiring women to seek proof of their whereabouts in the community

makes it difficult for them to hide their identity as parolees and thus makes them vulnerable to discrimination by employers, teachers, and potential friends (Pager 2003). Specifically, this rule has the effect of “outing” the women as former prisoners to community members that they see on a regular basis, which can hinder their reentry process and gaining social acceptance from others, including employers (Richie 2001). In addition, regular call-in times and rigid schedule itineraries were an inconvenience and often exasperated the residents, especially those without a cell phone. Enforcement of these requirements commonly led to confrontations between the women and the staff and led some residents to view the house as akin to a prison rather than as a helpful resource for their reentry process.

Jennifer, who attends community college, must have a form signed each day by her professors, verifying her attendance in class. Because the form’s letterhead clearly indicates that she lives at a halfway house, she is unable to keep her identity as an ex-offender a secret from her professors. While I am not sure whether or not the professors developed an opinion of her or her work based on her background, research on the stigma associated with a criminal background suggests that divulging such information could lead to the person being ostracized. Jennifer believes that, while professors have never treated her differently, another student suddenly changed her behavior after learning that Jennifer was a parolee. One day, a professor looked at her attendance record and noticed that the name on the form was different than the name she used in class. He asked her about it, to which she replied that the name on the form was her parolee name. Since that day, the student she had made friends with never sat by her again and often clutched her

purse when in close proximity to Jennifer. While Jennifer's feelings were hurt by this change in behavior, attendance verification forms may lead to more significant consequences for parolees than simply alienating them from potential friends. The networking one does in college can lead to relationships with non-criminals as well as employment and roommate opportunities. Thus, rules that force one to reveal a criminal history can limit social interactions in the community which may hinder the reentry process because it can limit the ex-offenders' ability to form positive social ties to others, including employers and teachers.<sup>36</sup>

Bernice, who does not have a cell phone, also reported how stressful call-ins could be. Upon returning home from her first day of college, Bernice told me about her frantic search for a pay phone. Her anxiety was the consequence of being torn between checking in with the house and locating her next classroom before the start of class. A few weeks later, Bernice once again had to choose between finding a pay phone and catching the bus. If she had missed the bus, she would have arrived home later than the time allotted on her itinerary. As soon as Bernice arrived at the house, the monitor told her that she had better have a good reason for missing her call-in time. Luckily, the monitor understood Bernice's explanation and did not place her on restriction or write her up for the infraction. If Bernice had been written up, her parole agent would have been notified. Each write-up increases the likelihood that a resident will be kicked out of SECOND CHANCES. Residents frequently complained that the rules were not applied to all of the residents equally and that monitors had their "favorites."

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<sup>36</sup> Jennifer was briefly employed by the Salvation Army. Although, she had to have her attendance form signed by her boss, she does not think he treated her any differently.

Bernice, who lived at the house on a volunteer basis, did not mind explaining herself, but Mona, who was sanctioned to the house, resented it. In a similar situation, Mona missed her call-in time and as soon as she returned home, she was required to explain why she did not check-in. Mona explained in an impatient tone that she was running around in the heat looking for a phone and that she nearly missed the bus. She argued that the time allotted on her itinerary did not give her enough time to take care of her business and find the closest pay phone. Mona was clearly sober and had verification for where she had been, so her rule violation was not reported.

Although the monitor did not penalize Mona for missing her call-in time, Mona was irritated with the inquiry because she resented being subject to control. In fact, when she purchased a cell phone, the call-in times remained a source of irritation. She explained that she had to set alarms on her phone so that she would remember when to call in and that she was expected to follow the timelines on the itinerary, even if her appointment took longer than expected. She was also angry that SECOND CHANCES did not permit her to go out for social activities, unless the activity was with her sponsor and occasionally with other residents to see movies or to attend church. Specifically, she could not visit with her boyfriend because he was also on parole, a rule which did not make sense to her. After all, she said, the entire time in prison is spent with other offenders and she had been sanctioned to a house with parolees.<sup>37</sup> When she pointed this out to the house parole agent, she was simply told, “That’s different.”

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<sup>37</sup> Mona was sent to SECOND CHANCES because she traveled out of the county, without permission, to visit her daughter.

Parole terms that prohibit mingling with other parolees may not be misguided. Research suggests that spending time with “non-conventional” others can lead to involvement with criminal activities. Yet, most women meet other parolees while attending drug treatment programs or 12 step meetings in which they were urged to participate.<sup>38</sup> In addition, women often met other parolees while receiving services at the parole office or while waiting in the lobby for an appointment with a parole agent.<sup>39</sup> Thus, Mona’s point was valid but was not treated as such, thereby highlighting her powerlessness and silencing her concerns. Frustrated by his lack of response, she never questioned the rules again. Instead, she regularly complained about the rules with her roommate, Nancy, and they tried to find ways to get out of the house even if they did not have an appointment or a 12-step meeting to attend. Together, they looked forward to the day they could leave the program. Instead of viewing SECOND CHANCES as an opportunity, they described themselves as being, “locked up on the outside.”

### **Rule Enforcer versus Empowerment Leader**

SECOND CHANCES receives approximately \$1,500 per month for each bed that remains filled all 30 days. With this money, the DOC expects SECOND CHANCES to have a monitor on site at all hours and everyday to supervise the activities of the residents, and to provide case management services to residents. Specifically, the DOC expects SECOND CHANCES to assist parolees with employment and educational goals

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<sup>38</sup> Itineraries for 12 step meetings were rarely if ever denied. Sometimes women went to the meetings just to get out of the house.

<sup>39</sup> The parole office had a computer lab where residents could work toward their GED; mental health treatment was also provided.

and with the management of stress, anger, and money. SECOND CHANCES is also expected to provide therapeutic services through individual, group, and family counseling.

DOC funding covered little more than staff salaries and room and board for the residents. Although local masters of social work schools referred student interns to SECOND CHANCES, the six interns present during my research were in their first year of their programs with little to no work experience as social workers. In fact, most were fearful of working with parolees. Therefore, monitors, on eight dollars an hour wages and with no extra training aside from a high school degree, juggled a variety of responsibilities and were expected to handle whatever occasion should arise, including answering questions about other interns. In addition, there is usually only one monitor on duty at a time, so that person has to supervise and provide assistance to 15 residents. It is no surprise that monitors sometimes alienate residents, make snap decisions, or forget to follow up on something a resident needs. Consequently, residents' complaints about staff were as frequent as complaints about the rules.

The staff is expected to embody two roles that are inherently contradictory: the role of rule enforcer and the role of case manager (known in the house as "empowerment leader"). While the monitors try to balance rule enforcement with case management as best they can, monitoring the residents tends to be prioritized. This is largely because the DOC emphasizes rule enforcement over case management.<sup>40</sup> Of course, one of the main

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<sup>40</sup> To make sure SECOND CHANCES is in compliance with the rules, a variety of forms have to be filled out. In contrast, the DOC tracks transitional services with one form.

reasons the DOC has so many rules is to protect SECOND CHANCES from liability. Because they do not want to be found responsible for harms caused by the parolees, they require a paper trail to show that they did everything possible to keep residents and the community safe. For example, if a fight erupts in the house, a resident overdoses, drugs are bought or sold on the premises, or someone breaks the law off property, the monitor needs to show that she followed DOC protocol. Failure to do so could result in the DOC getting into trouble which could result in funding being withheld from SECOND CHANCES.<sup>41</sup> Thus, to a certain extent, the daily operations of the house are based on fear that parolees will misbehave, which is similar to how a prison is run. Unfortunately, fear stymies the ability of SECOND CHANCES to offer the supportive services that residents need during reentry.

In their role as rule enforcers, staff make sure that residents fill out itineraries, call-in on time, and return to the transitional house on time. Monitors administer drug tests, they search returning residents' bags for contraband, they verify that chores have been done properly, and they open and close doors and cabinets looking for drugs and other contraband. In addition, the monitors control residents' access to bus tokens, medicine, telephone use, frozen food, toiletries, and cleaning supplies.

When a resident is involved in a minor rule infraction, monitors often have the discretion to determine the repercussions. For example, when a resident talks back to staff or is involved in a conflict with another resident, misses a call-in time or comes back from an itinerary late, monitors may choose to respond in various ways. They can

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<sup>41</sup> According to Melinda, the DOC is fearful of the public's reaction if crime was committed by a resident from a facility they funded.



do nothing, recommend to Melinda that a person be placed on restriction,<sup>42</sup> or write up the resident, which would put the person on the house parole agent's radar and could jeopardize her place at SECOND CHANCES. Thus, monitors are able to use their discretion in most cases, and thus have a significant amount of power over the parolee's daily life. Although SECOND CHANCES contrasts their relations to residents from those of agents of the criminal justice system, house monitors are similar to parole agents with regard to the power, control, and discretion they possess (Simon 1993).

### **Forms of Resistance to DOC rules**

Melinda encouraged the monitors to carefully consider the significance of a rule infraction when deciding whether or not to write-up a resident or to report her behavior in the "black book," which was a record of the comings and goings of the women on her shift. Specifically, because the house agent read everything put in the "black" book, she asked staff to keep as much as possible out of the black book. Over time, I recognized her insistence that we limit information written in the black book as her primary method of resistance to the DOC rules. According to Melinda, the parole officers did not care what happened to our clients; she wanted us to keep the clients "safe" by keeping their actions internal, unless it was absolutely necessary to involve the agent.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, she also supported staff decisions to report rule infractions because otherwise, "they'd think I don't have their back." Most staff, in fact, preferred to report rule infractions, asserting

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<sup>42</sup> When on restriction, the resident cannot leave the house for at least two weeks, except to attend drug treatment or school.

<sup>43</sup> When interns asked what constituted a "necessary" reason for a write-up, we were told that acts of violence toward self or others should be written in the black book.

that Melinda was “too soft” and stating that residents needed to know there would be consequences to their behaviors in order to resocialize and discipline them.<sup>44</sup>

Melinda also asked other residents not to report each other for rule infractions.<sup>45</sup>

One Saturday night when Bernice and Erica were watching football, another resident became agitated and told Teresa to turn down the television. Bernice refused, at which point the resident picked up several advertisements out of the newspaper and used them to slap Bernice’s face. The monitor, Peggy, immediately ran back to the main room, and reminded Bernice that she could not retaliate with violence because it would be a parole violation.<sup>46</sup> Peggy then called Melinda, who urged Bernice not to report the situation to the police. According to Bernice, Melinda promised to handle the situation “in-house.” Bernice refused, arguing that she had to report the incident in order to protect herself. She explained that on the streets she would have “beat that bitch down,” that she had almost lost control, and that she was fearful of what she would do if it happened again. “I’m not going back to prison,” she explained as she justified her decision to call the police. Thus, staff and residents alike often disagreed with Melinda’s desire to avoid official involvement into the house affairs.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> The one rule Melinda felt strongly about was drug testing. She thought drug testing kept residents fearful and therefore sober. Helen disagreed, arguing that it was inhumane to watch women pee in a cup.

<sup>46</sup> Whenever residents became angry with one another, staff resorted to reminding the woman that the house agent would violate her if she became violent.

<sup>47</sup> Part of the reason Bernice called the police instead of trusting Melinda to handle the situation was because Bernice did not think rule-violators should be given second chances, especially if it jeopardized another resident. In this case, she was concerned that the resident would assault her again, and that she would retaliate, which would lead to time in jail. In another case, Melinda let several residents stay in the house after using drugs in the backyard. Bernice disagreed with Melinda’s decision, because those who used put recovering addicts, like herself, at risk.

Melinda believed that there were other ways that you could encourage “women to do what’s best for them,” ways that did not involve punishment. In lectures to women who had not followed their itinerary, Melinda would sympathize with them by saying “I know you’re trying and it’s hard,” but she’d also make references to gender-normative behavior. She’d remind women of their children and ask, “Is that the kind of mother you want to be?” Among women who did not have a close relationship with their children, she’d ask, “Is that the kind of woman you want to be?” In this way, she evoked fears of being labeled as “bad” mothers and “bad” women. Melinda relied on this technique as a way to avoid punishing the women.

Melinda also used stereotypes about women in abusive relationships. For example, during one supervision session, I reported a conversation I had with Mona, who was in an abusive relationship. Mona’s boyfriend had threatened her daughter and herself. I felt that the situation was serious, so I voiced my concern for the resident’s safety during supervision. I also expressed a desire to locate counseling for other residents who had told me about their histories of being abused.<sup>48</sup> Melinda responded by explaining that most women become involved in abusive romantic relationships because they are looking for a “meal ticket.” I knew that was not the case with Mona, who was actually giving her romantic partner money each month. I also knew of another resident involved with an abusive man; she too gave him money. In fact, her partner was homeless and living in a van. Melinda suggested that the other reason women are in unhealthy relationships is because they do not understand what love really is. Rather than

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<sup>48</sup> Given the prevalence of abuse among women offenders, I was surprised that it was not addressed in a home with a feminist orientation.

express concern for the safety of these women, she tried to explain their relationships based on negative stereotypes of women in abusive relationships. This surprised me, given her self-identity as a feminist.

After supervision was over, Melinda came up to me with a new idea. She said that the woman's center at the local university had many pamphlets regarding safety, as well as opportunities to take self-defense classes. Women these days, she explained, are very fearful. She urged me to convey my fear for the safety of residents who reported involvement with abusive partners. If I stated, "that doesn't sound very safe," she thought that would remind women of their fragility, which might discourage them from seeing the men in question. Moreover, from then on, interns were instructed to remind women who wanted to leave the program that "the streets aren't safe." In this way, they might alter their behavior on their own and do what's best for them, and we would not have to officially sanction them.

Melinda's response to my concern about women suffering from abuse reflects the societal tendency to blame the victim for being abused. It is also related to the lack of funding allocated to provide rehabilitative and counseling services for the residents. Specifically, Melinda did not have the means to professionally intervene with regard to the violence women had experienced, just like she did not have the funding to hire a job developer or an in-house therapist. However, this interchange is a firm reminder that programs for women do not necessarily incorporate gender-specific programming, even when "lip service" is paid to the differences between male and female offenders. In the state of this study, the DOC hosts training sessions dedicated to discussing gender-

sensitivity, but the staff at SECOND CHANCES have clearly not attended training on the prevalence of abuse among women offenders or how to best respond to it, given their preoccupation with explaining why women would be with abusers rather than how to assist and support women who are experiencing abuse.

### **Empowerment Leaders**

As “empowerment leaders,” monitors’ responsibilities stand in contrast to the authority they wield as rule enforcers. In their role as case managers, each monitor is responsible for linking several of the parolees to community services and staying in relationship with her so as to help when new problems arise. This relationship is first formed when a resident arrives at the house, at which time her empowerment leader is supposed to do the intake paperwork with her. During this process, the parolee is asked questions about her goals, concerns, family relationships, job history, mental and physical health, and substance abuse history. With this information, the monitor is supposed to link the parolee to community resources and find programs suited for her. The DOC requires each resident to spend 20 hours in programming, which can be classes in life skills, literacy, counseling, community resources, and victim awareness. The monitors are also supposed to provide emotional support by listening and caring about the troubles she has and will continue to face.

Feeley and Simon (1992) have suggested that that parole officers spend most of their time with risk management and surveillance. Similarly, house monitors are often unable to devote much time or effort as “empowerment leaders.” When and if the monitor does the intake, it usually does not happen until weeks after a resident enters the

program,<sup>49</sup> and when she does do it, the paperwork it is often rushed due to lack of sufficient staff. Because of time constraints, the day monitor occasionally asks the resident to do it herself. At other times, an intern will be asked to do the intake.

The reality of the time crunch is that the intake process does not serve its purpose. When a monitor does the intake, she is often interrupted by one of her other responsibilities, like answering the phone or opening a door or cabinet for a resident. This constant distraction means that the monitor is unable to give the resident her full attention. When a resident does the intake on her own, she usually does not know its purpose. For that reason, and the stigmas associated with domestic violence, mental illness, and substance abuse, residents often divulge as little private information as possible. Lastly, interns receive no training on intake and are not taught its purpose, and therefore often ask the questions one after the other without building a relationship or relaying important information to her empowerment leader. The following examples highlight the downfall of the intake process.

Betty was asked to fill out her intake paperwork by herself. Betty, who had been incarcerated for 12 years and received little formal education, kept returning to the monitor for assistance. The monitor was particularly busy that day, saw me walk by, and told Betty that, as an intern, I would be able to help. Without a clue about what the paperwork was for, I began asking questions about her employment history, drug history, her mental health, the number of children she had, how long she had been in prison and where she had been incarcerated. When I asked her what her drug of choice was, she

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<sup>49</sup> During the period that I was at SECOND CHANCES, several women did not go through the intake process for two months.

inhaled a puff from her cigarette, looked at me sideways through squinted eyes, and said, “Cocaine. But I haven’t used since before I went to prison.” Her response suggested that she was concerned with (a) what would I do with a written record of her drug history, (b) what I would think of her, or both. Could she trust me enough to tell the truth about her life? Would anything she said be kept confidential? What would I do with this information? Neither of us knew. This was the first time I had met Betty and I suspect that she felt, as I did, that the questions were intrusive and none of my business.

More importantly, I was asking questions meant to uncover her mental stability, family attachment, and the extent of her involvement with illegal substances, information most people only reveal to their closest confidants. While such questions may have been designed to reveal residents’ needs, I suspect that few residents felt comfortable having their personal information recorded in such an impersonal way or having it included in official records. Jada, for example, felt comfortable telling me intimate details of her life when I took her to doctors’ appointments. However, when I later did her intake paperwork, she gave ambiguous, short answers and repeatedly asked what I would do with the information.

While the lack of time a monitor can dedicate to case management is an issue, perhaps more problematic are the mixed messages residents receive about the nature of their relationship to the monitor. Residents do not feel safe sharing information with people who can write them up or report them to the director or to the house parole agent as they fear such information might be used against them or to subject them to further

surveillance and social control.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, if a resident does share information with a staff person, and that staff person sides with another resident during a squabble, or reveals some personal information to another staff person, the resident feels betrayed, hurt, and angry.<sup>51</sup> Yet staff have to exchange information between one another because they have to work together to monitor and track parolee information and they are expected to intervene when conflicts arise between residents.<sup>52</sup>

In my interviews with residents, not one woman referenced a staff providing case management services. In light of the monitors' contradictory responsibilities, this should not be surprising. Yet when asked what they would change about the house, several interns and residents mentioned better staff training. Residents and interns alike failed to recognize the relationship between the lack of services and funding, for SECOND CHANCES and community agencies, and instead pointed to unqualified staff as the main problem.

### **Residents' Responses to Rules**

An interesting contradiction emerged between my ethnographic observations and the information I obtained through my in-depth interviews with residents. While interacting with the residents, they would discuss aspects of life at SECOND CHANCES that they disliked, as discussed above. However, when asked about the rules at SECOND CHANCES, few voiced complaints about them. In fact, several residents argued that the

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<sup>50</sup> Fieldnotes

<sup>51</sup> Fieldnotes

<sup>52</sup> Conflict between residents is usually related to how space is shared between roommates and who gets which donations.



rules should be enforced more rigidly than they were. One possible reason for this is that questions about SECOND CHANCES were asked after questions about their pathway to crime and after discussing their experiences immediately following release. It is possible that highlighting their disadvantage reminded them of how powerless they were, especially given the number of women who reported homelessness. In such a case, the house rules may not have seemed as upsetting when cast against their preceding living arrangements. In addition, the women who accepted my invitation to be interviewed were more often women who remained at SECOND CHANCES for longer periods of time, and who chose to stay there voluntarily.<sup>53</sup> Some of the women who left may have verbalized dislike of the rules at SECOND CHANCES more so than those who were interviewed.

It is also possible that the women who were interviewed had grown used to the strict control through prison and residential treatment facilities or through their upbringing. Research on class-based parenting suggests that working class parents assert more strict discipline than middle class parents (Lareau 2003). Given the class backgrounds of the women at SECOND CHANCES, it is possible that they perceive strict rules as a sign that authority figures care for them.

However, several women revealed another reason why SECOND CHANCES was not described as a highly controlled environment. They each report drug treatment programs in which women are involved in group work for the majority of the day and

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<sup>53</sup> At the conclusion of my ethnographic work, I recruited residents for interviews. Some women are discussed in the ethnographic observations but were not interviewed because they left before interviews began.

night, with little freedom over what they will do during the day.<sup>54</sup> Susan described the perceived benefit of SECOND CHANCES flexibility as preparing someone for independence in society, as compared to other programs:

You're like on lockdown, and you're on this schedule...6:30am-8:30pm, mandatory meetings. And it's like, whoa. Here there are things that are required of us but they also give us a breath of freedom because they're trying to transition us back into society. Now if you're going straight from prison into this lockdown home, and then thrown back into society, I don't think that's going to work. How's that going to work? Here, you're given inch by inch. And it works if you want it to work. If you choose to be open.

With regard to rules, she recalls women returning to prison while she was still incarcerated, stating that they got kicked out of their drug treatment program for chewing gum or having a cell phone.

Felicia has been in and out of drug treatment programs for 10 years and reports disliking the strict regimen that kept her programming from the time she wakes up until the time she goes to bed. When she told me about the many groups she attended each day, I responded by saying, "that sounds exhausting," to which she replied, "No. It sounds like prison." Thus, compared to the control she experienced in other facilities, Felicia spoke positively about her experience at SECOND CHANCES. In addition, Felicia had spent time on the streets where "you can't trust nobody and everyone wants something from you." She framed SECOND CHANCES as a blessing because she was not expected to do anything in return for a place to sleep and shower.

These reports underscore the varying levels of control the women and their peers have been subject to, over the course of many years. While I, and residents who had left

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<sup>54</sup> At SECOND CHANCES women can lay in bed when they are not at school or in drug treatment.

SECOND CHANCES,<sup>55</sup> felt that staff tightly monitored and controlled their behaviors and movements, to those who had been extremely disadvantaged or in programs with higher levels of control, SECOND CHANCES represented “the right way” to transition a former prisoner into society.

### **In Support of Rules**

Several of the women reported the benefits of the rules and restrictions at SECOND CHANCES. According to Bernice, “I’m just a simple person. I don’t really mind the rules. Sometimes I feel like I do need rules and regulations in my life just because I love to run. I always have. I always love to do things Bernice’s way.”<sup>56</sup>

Likewise, Jennifer appreciated it when Melinda put her on restriction for a falsified itinerary, because then she knows she can’t get away with anything. She doesn’t mind the itineraries or the call-ins, because if, “I got to leave from 7 in the morning to 11 at night and not tell them nothing, I’d probably be loaded every time I get home.”

These statements are similar to those made by women on parole in Opsal’s (2008) study. She found that some of the women she interviewed thought too much freedom was a bad thing. In fact, some even sought out friends to hold them accountable for their whereabouts, effectively seeking surveillance in excess of that provided by their parole officers. Opsal concluded that some of these women, as a consequence of repeated run-ins with the law, “become increasingly accustomed—and increasingly comfortable—to being behind bars, and analogously, under surveillance. Furthermore, some of these

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<sup>55</sup> Many women resisted the control at SECOND CHANCES before leaving

<sup>56</sup> Ethnographic notes based on Teresa contradict this statement.

women may learn how to manage their addictions via this official surveillance” (Opsal 2008: 77).

Several residents also argued for stricter rules and for rules to be applied consistently. They disliked the discretion afforded to staff, even though that discretion benefited them at times. For example, Melinda asked the staff to overlook Bernice’s rule infractions on several occasions.<sup>57</sup> However, Bernice was one of the residents who thought no one should get second chances. She stated:

If you can’t live straight, then you’re just not ready to live. So if you’re going to give 1,2,3 dirties or if you’re going to go out 1,2,3 times and come back when you want, you need to be in a residential. You need to be out on your ass or whatever. You should not be able to come back here and get the same bed. ..Since I been here, maybe three or four residents here in the house have more than three times went out and got drunk, came back loaded, left, stayed out two or three days, came back, or different shit like that. That doesn’t motivate me, that makes me feel like, ‘What the fuck am I striving for? Why, if they can do it, why can’t I?’

Erica also argued that staff should apply rules to all residents equally. She thinks Melinda expects more out of certain people, which she believes is unfair. One resident in particular, who struggles with mental illness, was caught smoking crack in the backyard but did not get penalized. According to Erica, the staff was easy on her because she suffers from mental illness. But Erica disagrees with this logic, saying, “Well if she’s mental, what is she doing here? And trust and believe that she’s not mental. She’s faking the funk just to try to get SSI. And she’s not doing very well at that because they’re not giving it to her yet.” In actuality, the resident in question did suffer from an abusive history and had been hospitalized in psychiatric wards. It seems that what Erica was upset

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<sup>57</sup> These incidents were related to Teresa getting into a verbal confrontation with another resident over chores.

about was the perceived unfairness and that she herself was not given another chance after a dirty test. She recalls returning on Mother's Day night to a house that was "lit."

She said,

I tested dirty 'cause I drank with my kid. You know? And I get in trouble. Two weeks of no passes. And I'm like, 'Are you fucking serious?' And it just irritated the shit out of me because what could I do about it? I agreed to come to this program. I'm not a drug offender and I don't have an alcohol problem but I agreed to their rules and because all these other knuckleheads were just running wild and being disrespectful and just totally out of control in the house, I get two weekends taken from me? Are you serious? You couldn't give me a warning. Like, 'Hey, that shit ain't cool. Next time, something's going to happen?'

These rifts between residents limited any sense of solidarity from developing among them, and are a consequence of the way in which rules were applied. In addition, residents didn't identify staff discretion as beneficial; they didn't realize that Melinda was trying to protect them by encouraging staff to consider individual circumstances before penalizing a resident. Instead, they thought staff played "favorites" by granting second chances to some residents and not others.

### **The Rules are Good for Others**

Two of the residents, Erica and Julie, avoided criticizing the rules at the house by "othering," (Anzaldúa 2001) or placing themselves in a position of superiority as compared to other residents whose behavior should be regulated and monitored. Both of the women came from middle class backgrounds, had worked full-time for most of their lives, had not experienced state surveillance of their mothering via the foster care system, and had not lived on the streets. They were also more educated than their counterparts,

completing high school and specialized training,<sup>58</sup> and they did not identify as substance abusers.<sup>59</sup> Although they thought the rules were unnecessary and overly controlling in their own lives, they felt the rules were appropriate for those who struggled with drug addiction. However, the class differences between Erica and Julie and the other residents likely also influenced what they thought of the house rules. Specifically, they were not accustomed to heightened social control that permeates the lives of poor women and did not view constant surveillance as an expected part of their lives (Haney 2010). Others who thought the rules were beneficial, or who sought stricter implementation of the rules, had experienced the loss of their children to the foster care system, had more interaction with criminal justice professionals, and were poor. For them, the house rules were better than what they expected as they were comparatively lenient to the rules enforced by state agencies, such as the criminal justice system, the foster care system, the welfare department, and drug treatment programs.

When asked what Erica thought of the rules, she stated:

I just feel like I'm not one of them. You know, I don't have a drug problem.. I don't have a problem with testing for them and all of that stuff. But all this other bullshit... Like I can't come and go as I please? [It] drives me up the wall. 'You want me to bring proof that I was at the eye doctors?' Are you fucking serious? You know, that kind of stuff just irritates the crap out of me. Getting papers signed and all of this other bullshit. And just... you only have a certain amount of time to go to Wal-Mart. You only have a certain amount of time to be in the grocery store. I'm forever looking at my watch. And then when I go on the weekends to see my daughter, the way they want me to call every two hours. I can't remember that! I forget and they call me and chew me out.

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<sup>58</sup> Dental hygienist and certified to work with heavy equipment (ie forklift operator)

<sup>59</sup> Erica and Julie were incarcerated for assaulting significant others; they assert that they were defending themselves from their partners.

The rules Erica resented the most were (1) not being able to have a car and (2) informing employers about her criminal record. She explained:

I can't have a car. Why? I'm licensed, I'm insured, my car is totally legal. It's dumb. That kinda shit is just dumb. It's like they want to stop you...reporting that you're a parolee to potential job places... It's just, I don't feel like they really, truly allow you the freedom to go out there and succeed. Like going out there and doing job searches. Okay, if you're going to do job searches, and you still need that stupid paper signed, you're in the hole before you even got out the gate...[Employers think] 'Oh, we got a felon here.' You know, it's just not cool.

Unlike other residents who did not mind the rules or argued for stricter enforcement of the rules, Erica described the rules as an impediment to successful reentry. Erica had worked for most of her life, had owned homes with significant others, and was not addicted to illicit substances. Thus, her life experiences were very different from the other women who lived at the house. She had not encountered heightened social control that other residents had lived under, and this likely shaped her perception of the house rules.

### **Program Benefits**

When asked about the benefits of SECOND CHANCES, residents identified free room and board and emotional support as the best aspects of living at the house<sup>60</sup> This latter finding reinforces research that indicates that the women have little emotional support from family. Identifying basic needs, like shelter, as a key benefit of the program reflects the extent of disadvantage that permeates their lives. Several examples will help to clarify these points.

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<sup>60</sup> Although there were often complaints about staff members, residents usually identified one staff who they could talk to, if they needed to.

According to Bernice, who had been incarcerated for 12 years and had lost touch with all of her family members, “I really don’t believe that there’s anywhere better than here. Where am I gonna go that I don’t have to pay rent? I can eat all day long, which I love to do, and I gotta bed.” Regarding the benefits of living at SECOND CHANCES, Felicia asserted, “My basic needs are met here; shelter, food, and water. I get up in the morning out of my bed *that they provide*. I make that bed *that they provide*. Then I go get my hygienes, *that they provide*, and then I go to the shower and turn on the water *that they provide*. All my needs are met here. And maybe I’ve been wearing the same clothes over and over because I don’t have money to buy clothes, but I’m not even tripping over that.” Bernice and Felicia both struggled with basic skills, such as reading, writing, computer literacy, and acquiring a job and they could have benefited from having those needs addressed. Although the state’s goals for the program, as well as Melinda’s goals, involved much more than free room and board, most of the women perceived the program’s main purpose to be providing shelter and food. In that regard, SECOND CHANCES was successful by virtue of the basic material resources it provided.

When Jennifer was asked about the benefits of SECOND CHANCES, in addition to housing, she identified staff as helpful because “they make sure when I call in that I’m okay. They ask if I’m okay. They ask what I’m doing.” Having lived on the streets for ten years, Jennifer perceived the frequent phone calls to be a benefit, because someone cared enough to care about her whereabouts. In contrast, the DOC thought of the phone calls as a way to monitor their behavior, as did the staff.



Roberta also thought of the staff as helpful, despite their role as monitors. She believed they had helped to raise her confidence by smiling at her, occasionally joking with her, and making her feel welcome. Likewise, Janet stated, “It’s good to have people to wake up to, that you can say good morning to. Most of them will say, ‘Good morning, sunshine’ or whatever. And that makes you smile.” What is striking about these examples is how little positive interaction the women had experienced outside of SECOND CHANCES. Ethnographies of community treatment programs provide a framework to understand how something as simple as a smile can be identified as acceptance and support (Haney 2010; Horowitz 1996). Specifically, staff members may go beyond monitoring behavior to morally evaluating residents’ behavior. Women in my study may identify a smile as a form of support because they have been in previous treatment programs where their behavior is morally evaluated and where they feel rejected by staff. However, these accounts also demonstrate how few positive relations with other people the women have in their everyday lives.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter explored the experiences of women in a halfway house to learn more about the ways it helps and hinders women as they transition from prison into society. Ethnographic research on a halfway house is nonexistent, but existing research based on community correctional facilities and residential treatment facilities suggests that such facilities fail to equip women with the skills necessary for their success and tend to focus on individual failings (Haney 2010; Goodkind 2009; Hannah-Moffit 2001). Similarly, although the stated goals of SECOND CHANCES include enabling women to transition

into society through the accumulation of skills and access to resources, very little is offered in terms of meeting those goals. Because of rules mandated by the DOC, and as a consequence of insufficient funding, SECOND CHANCES serves as an extension of surveillance above and beyond what other parolees experience. Thus, unlike the aforementioned research, the reason for the lack of practical support seems to have less to do with the discourses evoked by staff and more to do with the policies dictated by the DOC and lack of state funding for providing supportive services to this population. As Haney (2010) suggests, partnerships with non-governmental agencies should not be mistaken for state retrenchment. In fact, the social control evident at SECOND CHANCES mirrors a broader shift in penal policies toward punishment rather than rehabilitation (Travis and Lawrence 2002).

My ethnographic and interview data suggest that most of the residents have experienced extreme marginalization and have consequently been involved in state systems of control for many years. Although there are a variety of ways in which the rules and regulations hinder a resident's transition into society, many of the women did not voice this concern when asked in formal interviews. In the next chapter, I explore the narratives of the residents, which reveals the extreme poverty they faced prior to residing at SECOND CHANCES. For women with few options, it may not be as troublesome to exchange freedom for shelter. However, what this means is that those who cannot meet their basic needs continue to be subjected to heightened surveillance that threatens their ability to reside outside of prison gates.

**CHAPTER IV**  
**PRE-RELEASE PLANNING AND BEYOND:**  
**MEETING PAROLEES' BASIC NEEDS**

**Introduction**

“Ever see Jailhouse Rock with Elvis Presley?” our intern supervisor, Helen, asks one morning during supervision. “In the movie, a guy gets into trouble, spends time in jail, and after he is released, he returns to the middle-class life he had before. Most people assume that you can go back to your home and your family after you leave prison. But I’ve gone to pick women up at prison at 8 in the morning. The vast majority have no one waiting for them. So, for most of you, someone would be there and we built our system with that assumption. But for our clients, no one is.

According to Travis (2005), the most immediate need for returning prisoners is to secure a place to live. In fact, housing is so important for success on parole that it has been described as, “the lynchpin that holds the reintegration process together” (Bradley, Richardson, Oliver, and Slayter 2001:7). While men and women both have a need for stable housing, women express a greater need for help with housing (La Vigne, Brooks, Shollenberger 2009). Although we know very little about the exact housing arrangements of parolees over time, most do have a place to stay the night of release, often with family or friends (Petersilia 2003, Travis 2005). But what happens to women who are released without an answer to the question “where will I sleep tonight?” Historically, the parole agent supervised and assisted parolees, so it seems plausible that a parolee’s agent may help her answer that question. Yet, we know relatively little about whether or not women perceive their parole agents as responsive to their basic needs.

One of the central purposes of this chapter is to learn more about the experience of women who are released from prison with no place to go and whether or not their parole agent helped them meet their basic needs. Most of the women in this study have lived lives plagued by disadvantage, yet they are offered little assistance both prior to release and immediately following their exit from prison. With few options and little social support, the women in this study chose to stay in a facility that subjects them to more social control than they would otherwise experience. Because of their poverty, they must, “trade their freedom for free room and board.”<sup>61</sup> This chapter concludes with a discussion of women’s perception of the relationship between disadvantage and recidivism. Specifically, the women in this study suggest that parolees desire to live law-abiding lives, but that they are often unable to meet their basic needs without breaking the law.

### **Housing for Parolees**

Numerous studies suggest that returning prisoners are more likely to complete parole if they can acquire employment and participate in substance abuse treatment, yet success at either of these goals often hinges on having a safe, secure place to live (Richie 2001; Schram et al. 2006; Brown and Bloom 2009; Bushway, Stoll and Weiman 2007). While it is possible that prisons could help inmates develop a plan for the period immediately following release, only 12% of prisoners were involved in pre-release programs (Petersilia 2003). According to Petersilia, most prisoners would like to participate in such programs, but there are more prisoners than funded programs. Those

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<sup>61</sup> Fieldnotes; Helen made this statement

that do exist cover topics like how to fill out a job application, how to ride a bus, how to apply for a driver's license, and the terms of parole, but the programs do not usually include housing assistance. Moreover, curriculum is usually left to the discretion of instructors, so content is highly variable. It is not a surprise that studies designed to investigate the effectiveness of pre-release programs have not found them to be effective.<sup>62</sup>

Pre-release programs may quell the anxiety prisoners experience as the day-of-release approaches. Severance (2004) interviewed 40 women shortly before the end of their prison sentences. Her respondents cited concerns regarding family reunification, sobriety, and meeting their basic needs; their main way to cope with these concerns was to pray. Although her study highlighted their concerns, she did not investigate whether or not they participated in pre-release planning. More research on the concerns prisoners face as release approaches as well as their perceptions of pre-release programs is necessary.

Pre-release programs may also reduce the number of prisoners caught in "the revolving doors of homeless shelters and prison" (Travis 2005:243). Researchers at Community Resources for Justice asked homeless inmates what would help them to secure housing. Sixty-nine percent of prisoners expressed a desire for a prison counselor to help them understand their housing options. It is notable that the inmates wanted someone to guide them through their housing choices more than they wanted money for

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<sup>62</sup> The most recent studies on prerelease programs were conducted in the 1970s-1980s; such programs have declined in number as rehabilitation lost popularity (Petersilia 2003)

rent or free transportation. Unfortunately, few prisons offer counselors to help with housing

Some states offer two-to-four week vouchers to help pay for a motel room, and most states provide “gate money” to exiting prisoners, which ranges from \$25 to \$200. The state where I did my field research does not offer any housing vouchers to exiting prisoners, but they do give \$200 to inmates on the day of their release. This amount of money is clearly inadequate to meet a prisoner’s basic needs in the period immediately following incarceration.

Fortunately, the majority of returning prisoners are able to stay with family upon release (Travis 2005; Breese, Ra’el, and Grant 2000; Seiter and Kadela 2003). In a study of 676 Texas prisoners conducted prior to their release, 71% had housing lined up. The majority of those who knew where they had resided were staying with family. Of those who did not have housing planned, most expected it to be pretty easy or very easy to find a place to live. Results of a Maryland study were similar (Visher, La Vigne, and Travis 2004).

Yet while most prisoners are able to stay with family upon release, these arrangements are usually temporary or unstable (Richie 2001; Brown and Bloom 2009). In La Vigne et al.’s (2009) study of released women offenders, the majority lived with family or friends immediately following release, but later in the year, 31% lived with another formerly incarcerated person and one in five was living with someone who abused drugs or alcohol, thus jeopardizing their success on parole. Qualitative work by O’Brien (2001) , Richie (2001), and Brown and Bloom (2009) found that women moved

multiple times the first year of release and that they were constantly worried about housing. These findings are not surprising given that many women moved repeatedly or were homeless shortly before incarceration and given the shortage of federal housing assistance for low-income people (Brown and Bloom 2009; Richie 2001).

Yet while most prisoners have a place to stay temporarily, a sizeable number of women re-enter society without a set place to live (Schram et al. 2006; Shantz, Kilty, and Frigon, 2009). In Mallik-Kane and Visser's (2008) study, 25% of women did not receive any tangible support from family. While the reasons for this went unexplored in their study, research suggests that offenders often come from disadvantaged families and that familial relationships are often damaged (Richie 2001; Bloom 2003; Covington 2002; Huebner et al. 2010, Travis 2005; Jacobs 2005). In fact, it may not be uncommon for parolees to leave prison gates with no one to meet them. Seventy five percent of the returning offenders in Nelson, Dress, and Allen's (1999) study had no one to meet them when they exited prison.

Unfortunately, the situation may be grimmer for female offenders, who are often more disadvantaged than their male counterparts. Although both men and women tend to come from low income backgrounds, women offenders tend to make less money prior to incarceration and have more difficulty acquiring employment following release. We also know that incarcerated men generally receive more financial and emotional support from family and partners than women (Jacobs 2005). Lastly, although family relationships are often tenuous for male and female ex-prisoners, for women especially, the family may not be a safe place to return to due to domestic violence (O'Brien 2001). It is therefore

not surprising that women's living arrangements are less stable than those of male ex-prisoners (La Vigne et al. 2009).

There are few alternatives for those who cannot return to the homes of family. Most inmates leave prison without savings or job prospects, and bad credit scores often make the private housing market out-of-reach (Petersilia 2000; Travis 2005). Even if parolees can afford to rent in the private housing market, landlords often decline their rental applications because of their criminal record (Opsal 2008). One study found that 43% of landlords surveyed would reject an applicant with a criminal conviction (Helfgott 1997). According to LaVigne et al. (2009), nearly 25% of the women surveyed reported difficulty obtaining housing as a result of having a criminal record.

Another option is public housing, but recent legislation bars prisoners with certain felony drug convictions from residing in publicly subsidized housing units. For parolees who qualify, the waiting lists for subsidized housing are often exceedingly long or closed altogether, and parolees compete against others who do not have criminal convictions.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, prisoners cannot begin the application process until after release, so public housing is not a viable solution for the period immediately following incarceration.

Parole restrictions also make it difficult to secure housing (Petersilia 2003; Travis 2005; Opsal 2008). The terms of parole dictate that parolees cannot associate with other parolees or those criminally involved, further reducing housing options for returning prisoners. This is especially troubling given research that indicates that returning prisoners are increasingly located in what Travis calls "areas of concentrated return" that

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<sup>63</sup> For example, in August 2010, 30,000 showed up for public housing applications in Atlanta. Limited applications led to rioting.



are characterized by concentrated disadvantage (Travis 2005; Richie 2001). Often these are impoverished urban areas that lack resources necessary to assist with the reentry process. Thus parolees are competing with one another and other poor people for scarce resources and are prohibited from rooming together due to the terms of parole.

One solution to the lack of housing options is to provide transitional housing facilities, or halfway houses, to inmates following their release (Travis 2005, Petersilia 2003). Halfway houses provide the basic necessities like food and shelter and help the parolee access community resources and acquire employment. In the 1970s, halfway houses were fairly widespread. According to Seiter and Kadela (2003), inmates who did not have solid post-release plans were *usually* released to a halfway house. Although there are few empirical studies of halfway houses, those studies indicate that recidivism rates are lower for house residents than their counterparts (Seiter 1975; Dowell, Klein, and Krichmar 1985). Despite their success in reducing crime rates, few halfway houses exist today. In a report by the American Correctional Association (2000), only 55 halfway houses operated in the country and fewer than .04 percent of all inmates released in 2000 resided in a halfway house.

There are two main difficulties with increasing the availability of halfway houses: neighborhood reaction and funding. With regard to community opposition to the placement of a transitional facility, Petersilia states:

A growing irrationality runs through much of sentencing practice today. Local citizens often fear criminals, particularly those recently released from prison. But, in most instances, these criminals are returning to their community in any event. Giving them a place to live and structured assistance at release can provide residents with *more* security than if the inmate were simply on the streets (2003:100, emphasis in original).

The second difficulty in providing shelter to parolees involves the lack of government funding currently available. For example, as awareness for the importance of gender responsive programming and the maintenance of mother-child bonds increased, California funded a number of transitional facilities for women with children. Unfortunately, most of these centers were shut down in 2009 as a result of the state's financial crisis (Hinkle and Bengs 2009). A number of residential drug treatment programs also lost funding.

The final option for those who are unable to stay with family and friends is to seek a bed in a homeless shelter. According to Travis (2005:236), the extent to which parolees seek assistance from public shelters is only superficially understood by parole agencies. Yet his review of studies of the homeless indicates that between 10 percent and 25 percent of released prisoners will be homeless within one year of their release. Moreover, the California Department of Corrections that found that between 30% and 50% of parolees in major urban areas like San Francisco and Los Angeles were estimated to be homeless.

Parolees who do not have a place to stay are at a greater risk for recidivism and the communities they return to are thus at risk, too (Visher and Travis 2003). It is therefore important to examine the experiences of parolees so we can better understand how they secure housing and what they do when they cannot do so. Qualitative research is therefore necessary to capture the experience of women as they exit prison gates and to identify sources of help and hindrance to successful reentry. Given that parolees are

told to meet with their parole agent within 24 hours of release, the agent may serve an important function for women without other sources of support.

### **The Role of the Agent**

For the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the states and the federal government used indeterminate sentences, which afforded parole boards the authority to hold a prisoner until he or she was ready for release. A highly discretionary system, it functioned as an incentive to prisoners to demonstrate good behavior and evidence of rehabilitation. Upon release, the prisoner was supervised in the community by a parole agent, whose express purpose was twofold: providing counseling and community resources to the offender and ensuring community safety (Petersilia 2003; Travis 2005). During this time, “The main goals of the criminal justice system...were rehabilitation and reintegration of the offender and it was explicit belief in these premises that guided the aforementioned policies” (Opsal 2008:56).

In the 1970s, this approach changed following a report based on 231 studies on prison programming that concluded that “nothing works” with regard to rehabilitation and recidivism. Critics from the left and the right used the study to support their claims that the current system was discriminatory and ineffective (Travis 2005). States adopted determinate sentencing, mandatory minimums and sentencing guidelines. Prisoners were thus released, sometimes without supervision, after serving long sentences with far fewer rehabilitative prison programs than in the past. These changes represented a shift in the operating philosophy of the criminal justice system, from rehabilitation to retribution and incapacitation (Opsal 2008:58).

According to Feely and Simon (1992:470), we have entered an age they call the “new penology.” They argue that parole is now used as a management tool in which “dangerous criminals” are monitored as opposed to assisted during reentry. The goal of parole agents is to oversee, “a population that cannot be disaggregated and transformed but only maintained—a kind of waste management function.”

The extent to which parole has shifted from rehabilitation to a system based entirely on surveillance and risk management has been debated (Lynch 1998; Opsal 2008). For example, the women Opsal (2008) interviewed perceived and expected parole to be a system of surveillance. In contrast, Lynch’s (1998) study of parole agents in California revealed that many preferred face to face interactions with their clients. She states, “Because of the close contact with the clientele, agents have an emotionally charged component to their job that is not easily encompassed by a ‘waste management’ role” (862). Nevertheless, most embodied an approach to their parolees that was more akin to “police officer” than “social worker.” Schram et al. (2006) found that many of the female parolees in their study were under-assessed for having needs like employment, housing, and drug or alcohol treatment; the authors suggested that this was related to an increased emphasis on custody rather than treatment.

Given the marginalized background of the majority of female inmates, it is not surprising that they experience fear and apprehension, and are not very knowledgeable about community resources (Richie 2001). Much literature has been dedicated to discussing the gendered pathway to prison as being a pathway of disadvantage in which crimes are committed as a survival mechanism (Bloom 2003). Additionally, many

women come from families who do not have the means to assist with reentry; others come from abusive backgrounds and therefore do not have a safe environment to which they can return. A central figure immediately following release is the parole agent, because the parolee must meet with him or her within 24 hours of release. The first six months following release are a crucial time for parolees because most who recidivate do so within the first six months to a year (Petersilia 2003). For women with a lack of options, the parole agent can play a central role in guiding women toward opportunities for legitimate success.

Regardless of whether or not agents desire to provide assistance to parolees, what is clear is that parole agents have few resources and high caseloads and those they are expected to supervise have received little in the way of pre-release planning or rehabilitative programming (Petersilia 2003). As stated by Schollosser (1998:76), “Inmates are simply released from prison each year in California; given nothing more than \$200 and a bus ticket back to the county where they were convicted.” The dominant “get tough on crime” rhetoric, coupled with budget cuts have resulted in the termination of many prison programs that were designed to assist former and current prisoners with reentry, such as education and job skills programs. Moreover, although there are few services for parolees after release, a recent study found that 70% of California recidivists are returned for parole violations, like a dirty drug test. There is a high demand for affordable drug treatment programs in the United States and insufficient funding leads to long waiting lists for such programs.

This chapter adds to the emerging body of literature on women's experience post-incarceration. Instead of asking former female prisoners about their challenges with work, family, or motherhood as they reintegrate, as many other studies have done, I instead focus on their experiences directly before and after they walk out of the prison gates. How do women with little to no social support go about meeting their basic needs of food and shelter? The role of prison pre-release programs and the role of the parole agent with regard to meeting basic and immediate needs of food and shelter is also discussed. With regard to prison preparation for release, it is worth noting that I did not seek to determine if programs actually exist, but rather, do the women know of programs that exist and were they helpful? Understanding the extensive and myriad challenges that women face enables us to understand why some would voluntarily choose to live in a halfway house that subjects them to more social control than they would otherwise experience.

### **Pre-Release Planning**

Without exception, respondents asserted that the prison did very little to assist them with housing at the point of release. Teresa, a 50 year old woman who spent 13 years in prison, explained that she had to come up with her own plan:

They have this parole thing that you're supposed to go to, but they don't really help you. You go over there. You go like maybe two weeks before you get ready to parole. They take down a lot of information, your background, all that stuff. Then they write-up (things) for you to do, but it's everything that you suggested yourself to do. So then they give you this little thing that you already suggested that you need to do, this program that you might want to go to. And then you leave and they call you back in maybe three or four days, after they finished typing it up, and then they give you this pamphlet with all the suggestions that you already made that you might want to do. And then in a couple days after that

you go see the PO [parole officer], the prison PO, and he tells you the things that they expect you to deal with.<sup>64</sup> But then that's all it.

While the meeting was supposed to help prepare Teresa for her release from prison, in actuality she located programs herself and thus planned for her own release. Given her long prison term, this is particularly problematic because society changed a great deal while she was behind bars. The pre-release planning Teresa participated in reflects an emphasis on individual initiative that has been found in other penal and welfare institutions (Haney 2004; Haney 2010). Like Teresa, Erica, a 41 year old woman who spent six years in prison, did not receive assistance from her counselor and instead prepared her own plan for the day of release. She explained:

I went to my counselor and asked him, 'Well, do you have any programs or anything that you can get for me?' 'No.' My own counselor: 'No.' So, I had to go to the library and I had to find this list that other inmates have provided that have been released, and that have come to programs and sent this information into the prison. [I have to find] other sources, because guess what, the prison ain't doing their job. Your counselor ain't gonna tell you shit. So yeah, you get resources from other prisoners, other inmates that have been there, done that. So I wrote to them myself and then a lot of the stuff takes so long to get into the prison that it's old information. I'd get letters back like 'No longer at this address, no longer exists, phone number disconnected,' or just no response at all, they wouldn't acknowledge me... Really, about thirty letters I sent out, and responses I got out of those 30, maybe 6. So the few places that I did find and that I did send letters to were like, 'When you get closer to release, when you're about two weeks to the gate, contact us then and we'll see if we have a bed for you.'

Similarly, Susan, a 35 year old Mexican-American who spent 3 years in prison also utilized information from another prisoner to secure housing:

And I started writing different homes, because I'm not mandated anywhere, I have no drug charge, so I start writing these different homes. I wrote the Second

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<sup>64</sup> Teresa is referring to the terms of her parole.

Chances Halfway House twice. I had heard about it from one of my friends that was here a year prior, and did excellent, so I was like, 'Okay I am gonna write.'

Interviewer: Did this friend write to you when you were in prison and tell you about it?

Susan: Yes, she did. She's like, 'Susan, you can do it.' We're from the same area and hard, you know. So I was like, 'Okay, if Sara can do it, I can do it.' So I write, and no response. For about seven months I'm writing different homes and I'm like geesh, you know. ...So anyways, Melinda ends up responding to me from the Second Chances House.

Susan had been homeless for a couple of years prior to incarceration, so she was fortunate to have a friend willing to pick her up on the day of release. She made friends with Monique, a college student who was in jail for traffic tickets, when she defended her from other inmates who were trying to "punk" her for her commissary. They began a relationship through letters after Monique was released, and she sent several care packages to Susan throughout her prison term. On the day that Susan was released, Monique was at the prison gates to pick her up. Susan was grateful to have Monique waiting for her because it helped her through the anxiety she felt upon entering the "free" world, and because she believes she would have been vulnerable to the temptations of the streets if she didn't have a source of support immediately following prison life.

Each of these accounts demonstrates the lack of assistance that the prison provides as an inmate's release date nears. These narratives also support research that indicates prisoners have the best intentions for leading crime-free lives (Petersilia 2003). My informants actively sought programs that would assist them in their efforts to remain in the free world. In addition, these accounts suggest that prisoners who have successfully navigated the reentry process may serve as a valuable resource to those who



are exiting the prisons gates. Relationships with some former prisoners may reduce the likelihood of recidivism, as opposed to increase the risk of continued criminality.<sup>65</sup>

In addition, while some women do have families and support systems to which they can return, the emphasis on “finding your own way home” overlooks the research indicating that women prisoners are less likely than men to have a partner to whom they can return, and that they often have less education and shorter employment histories than their male counterparts. It also overlooks that the majority of female inmates have experienced abuse as children and adults and therefore may not have a safe home where they can return, that women tend to have longer substance abuse histories than men, and that many inmates struggle with mental illness. As will be discussed later, many of my informants attribute a lack of pre-release planning to high recidivism rates.

### **Day of Release: No Place to Go**

Although the prison did little to help women plan for reentry, all but one of the ten women interviewed received \$200 for “gate money.”<sup>66</sup> With the exception of three of the women, the \$200 was used for a bus ticket home.<sup>67</sup> After buying a ticket, there was often little money remaining. The lack of emotional and financial support led some of the women to repeat the behaviors that led them to prison in the first place. Roberta, a 48 year old African American woman, was in prison because she accumulated \$80,000 in open container tickets, a charge related to her alcohol addiction. With no one to meet her

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<sup>65</sup>The terms of parole prohibit parolees for spending time together.

<sup>66</sup> Julie did not receive \$200 because she was transferred to another jurisdiction for another court case regarding unresolved traffic tickets.

<sup>67</sup> Susan had a friend pick her up and Julie’s mother picked her up after she went to court.

at prison, little money, and no place to go, Roberta wound up on the streets for the first time in her life. She believes that being homeless contributed to her relapse. She explains:

I was nervous because when I got out, my grandmother had passed away, and my parents had passed away, too. So basically when I got out of prison there wasn't no house to go to ... I was scared, because the rest of my family, I don't know where anybody at...and that led back to drinking again...I was out there by myself. So I just wanted to drink. It seemed to take my problems away.

Because Roberta started drinking shortly after she got off the bus in her hometown, she never reported to her parole agent. Instead, she lived on the streets or stayed in a friend's house whenever possible. Although she drank with her friends, they also took care of her. She explains, "You need a place to shower and stuff, being a female. They made sure I had clean clothes, that I had a little change in my pocket. They took care of me."

Janet is a 53-year old Caucasian woman who went to prison for two and a half years for a drug-related charge. She also struggles with addiction, the challenges of a mental illness, and has a history of abusive relationships. Janet refers to the \$200 gate money as "chump change," explaining that there isn't much left after buying a bus ticket. On the day she was released, she returned to the area she had been living in before imprisonment. With no place to live and no money, she walked the streets until she saw a man she had known before prison. She asked him if she could stay with him for a little while and he agreed. This turned out to be a very abusive relationship. Janet explains that she started using drugs again because "it took the pain (of abuse) away." But she also used drugs to feel safe on the streets. She recalls:

All of my boyfriends were abusive, you know, and the last one I had...He would kick me out all the time 'cause he was a drinker and when he got drunk and stuff and I wouldn't do what he wanted me to...I didn't do what he wanted me to do,

with other women or with him, he would kick me out. He would say, “Get out!” So instead of arguing with him, I’d just go. But the timing was at nighttime... So I would have to walk around at night, and that’s another reason why I would stay on drugs, ‘cause it would keep me up all night and I wouldn’t have to go to sleep or try to find a place to sleep and maybe get hurt.

Janet stayed with this man, who abused her mentally, physically, and sexually, until he “got tired” of her and kicked her out. At that point, she lived on the streets, working as a prostitute and using drugs until the police sent her to jail for absconding.<sup>68</sup> In Janet and Roberta’s case, a lack of post-prison planning in conjunction with addiction led to relapse into the lifestyle that had led to them to prison in the first place.

Felicia, 38 year old African American woman who struggles with mental illness and substance abuse, has been to prison five times for drug-related charges. When asked if the prison helped her prepare for release, she said, “Hell no!” and explained:

They just kick you out. Give you 200 dollars and say, ‘You be back.’ The guard told me this time, ‘You’ll be back in a couple of weeks.’ I looked at him, I said, ‘You know what, that’s fucked up.’ He said, ‘Prove me wrong.’

When asked if she has a place to go when she leaves prison, Felicia explained,

No, I just get a bus ticket and go back to the streets. Then I end up going back to prison... When you [are] out there in that lifestyle, you do all kinds of bad shit. And there’s a lot of people, a lot of people I know got AIDS. A lot of people I know is dead... Stephanie, I should have been dead.

Like Janet, Felicia had a history of homelessness, drug addiction, and mental illness.

With a lack of family, little money, and few options, she returned to the same streets that led her to prison in the first place. In addition, both women referred to concerns over their physical safety due to the violence and instability of life on the streets. The guard’s

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<sup>68</sup> When a parole agent does not know the whereabouts of a parolee, a warrant is issued for the person’s arrest. The parolee has “absconded.”

parting words to Felicia reflect the lack of sensitivity that society has for the disadvantages my respondents face, both before and after prison.

The most striking example of disregard of disadvantage is Jennifer, a 48-year old Somoan woman diagnosed with mental illness. As a woman who had been homeless for ten years, she accumulated tickets for riding the train without paying,<sup>69</sup> for jaywalking, for working as a prostitute, and she eventually wound up on probation for stealing a woman's car radio.<sup>70</sup> Jennifer was told to complete community service in order to fulfill the terms of her probation, but the paperwork to start community service cost \$60. Because she could not afford this fee, she never completed community service, so a warrant was issued for her arrest. As she sat in court, she heard other women say that they were going to ask for prison time instead of community service, because they could not afford to pay the required fee. Jennifer decided to follow in their footsteps; she went to prison for 10 months rather than reinstating her probation requirements in order to avoid the \$60 community service fee. After 10 months in prison, she used her gate money to buy a bus ticket back to her old neighborhood. Once the bus ticket was purchased, she had \$80 left and decided to return to a riverbed instead of renting a room, so that she'd have money left for food. The next day, she reported to her parole officer, who recommended that she find a shelter. Thus, Jennifer continued to live on the streets and, like the others, repeated the same behaviors that led to prison in the first place.

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<sup>69</sup> Jennifer would ride the train overnight so she'd have a safe place to sleep. Sometimes the police would ask her for her ticket. If she didn't have one, she'd be issued a citation.

<sup>70</sup> Jennifer says that she did not steal the radio, but followed the advice of her public defender who said she would avoid jail if she admitted to stealing it. She received probation instead.

### **Day of Release: A Place to Go**

Several of the women that I interviewed had family connections on the day of release. In addition to having family support following prison, these women were also less disadvantaged than those who had no place to go. Specifically, these women had steady work in their past and did not struggle with substance abuse. Strong bonds with a parent or with children prior to incarceration meant that they received care packages while in prison and had a connection to the outside world. The majority of women who had stable work histories tended to be more articulate and they did not have a diagnosed mental illness. This probably made it easier for them to navigate their release from prison and to maintain their relationships with people on the outside. Yet these women found themselves with nothing after their prison terms. Although these women did have a place to stay immediately following prison, the transition was difficult and their housing was only temporary.

For example, Julie, a 47 year old Caucasian woman, was unable to access her gate money because she was transferred to a jail in an adjoining county to face charges of failure to appear. She spent several days in jail before being released at midnight. Julie explains:

They didn't put (my gate money) in an envelope to transfer. I had...no money in my pocket. Luckily I had (my mom) to pick me up right on the spot. But if I didn't have her, who the hell was I going to call? (The police) aren't going to let you make a call...you'd have to walk at least a mile or two for a pay phone. Which is, at 12oclock at night, wrong.

Julie was told she'd receive her gate money within two weeks but it took a month for her funds to be released. Although she was able to stay in her mom's fifth-wheel trailer, the

lack of funds was problematic because they could not afford to stay in the RV parks near the area where she was mandated to stay.<sup>71</sup> Therefore, she had to lie to her parole officer about her address which put her at risk of returning to prison on a parole violation. Moreover, her mother was only in town temporarily in order to help Julie during the period immediately following prison. Thus, this arrangement was only temporary, because the terms of parole mandated her to live where her crime was committed, so she was unable to return with her mother to her home state.

Erica, a 41 year old Hispanic woman, found herself in a similar situation, but faced other challenges as well. On the day of release, she was greeted at the prison gates by family: her dad, her daughter, and her daughter's boyfriend. Erica explains that her daughter did not agree to pick her up or house her until a week prior to her release. She recalls the strangeness of being permitted to have physical contact after leaving the prison:

In prison, contact is not allowed. They don't want you having a girlfriend...that's breaking the rules. You're not allowed to touch staff, you're not allowed to speak to them, none of that. You're just like this wall.. just no contact. So I was treated that way for seven years, you know, of just, nothing. (On the day I was released) my family...is just standing there, by their cars...and I was just looking at them. And they come up to me. And I'm still on prison grounds and I've still got this 'don't touch mentality' and they touch me, they hug me and I tensed up and my dad was like, 'What's wrong baby?' and I said, 'I can't believe we're here. Can we please just leave? I'm going to be sick.'

Fortunately, Erica had family to meet her at the gates as she experienced the anxiety of being free again and she was able to stay with her daughter for six months. At that point,

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<sup>71</sup> Julie's mother did not live in the area; she came out specifically to help her transition out of prison.

their relationship disintegrated and her daughter kicked her out.<sup>72</sup> Although Erica's father was willing to provide her with shelter, she was unable to stay with him because he lived in another county.<sup>73</sup> According to the terms of parole, a parolee has to live in the county where she committed her crime. For parolees whose family members live in another county or in another state, the receiving county or state has to agree to the transfer, and the parole officer has to fill out the necessary paperwork to request it. Many counties are unwilling to accept a parolee unless they can exchange another parolee for a lower risk parolee. Therefore, even if a parolee has a stable, safe place to live, she may be forced to live in a homeless shelter or on the streets because of the terms of her parole

Mary, a 47 year old Caucasian woman who spent 32 months in prison, found herself homeless because of this transfer policy. However, her journey to the streets did not happen immediately. As her release date approached, she grew anxious about where she'd live:

I was panicking because I no longer know anyone in the city. My boyfriend, he moved on. My mom, she never lived out here. I didn't have my home anymore, no job, no nothing. The (prison drug program administrators) wanted me to go to a program for recovering addicts. I said okay. They said I could go to the program from here. So that was my plan, just go there.

Interviewer: Did you feel you should go because you were still struggling with your addiction?

Mary: No, I needed a home. Period. I didn't have anywhere to go. So I said okay, I'll try this place. So I got there and they have two or three people to (a room). And I just had a nightmare of a girl [roommate]. She was just psycho-woman...She told me that she didn't want me in that house, so I should leave...she told me, I think you should go. It was bunk beds and I was going to

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<sup>72</sup> Her daughter did not approve of the relationship Erica was in.

<sup>73</sup> Erica's parole agent was able to find her a halfway house to live in, so she avoided homelessness.

sleep on top of her and she made the statement, 'Well, if you hang out too much we'll have more than words.' She just kept on and on and on, so I lasted about four hours there and then I left. Because of the roommate... And I went and called my mom and she sent me some money and I found a place to stay for the weekend.

Mary's parole officer initially agreed that she could stay with her mother in a neighboring state as long as she returned regularly for her meetings with him. She was able to stay with her mother for a short time before the agent withdrew his offer and told her he could no longer allow this arrangement due to the terms of her parole and the receiving state's attitude toward parolees. Shortly thereafter, Mary wound up living at the riverbed with another homeless couple. As will be discussed shortly, Mary believes that the agent knew she would be homeless and did not care.

In summary, according to the women I interviewed, they had very little help securing housing on the day of their release from prison, which served to perpetuate their disadvantage and increase their chances of engaging in crime. Most wound up on the streets in a lifestyle of survival, which came with the risk of incarceration. Even for those women who did have a family to stay with, the terms of parole dictated that they reside where they committed their crimes. For the women in my study, this meant that they had to either find a program to stay in, or face life on the streets. Moreover, their narratives clarify the reason why they would choose to stay at SCTH in spite of the high level of social control that staff exerted; for most of my informants, this was their only choice besides homelessness.



## **Parole Officer**

As stated previously, parole agents were initially expected to assist parolees as they transitioned back into the community. Clearly, one of the most basic needs is housing. Yet, most of the women in my study believed that their agents were either apathetic to their basic needs or intensified their disadvantage. While the women did not consider restrictive parole terms to reflect badly on the parole agent, they still felt that agents could do more to address housing, transportation and food needs.

Recent research suggests that some parole agents are concerned with the needs of the people on their caseload, while others focus on surveillance. In my study, about half of the women felt that their agents were not helpful, especially with regard to housing, while the other half felt that their agents encouraged them and understood their situation. With few exceptions, those that spoke positively about their agents did not highlight the resources he or she provided, but instead emphasized their positive interactions and verbal praise. In this section, I explore the women's perceptions of their parole agent's role during their reentry. Based on my informants' descriptions, I identify two types of parole agents: the "Apathetic Parole Agent" and the "Agent of Encouragement," which are described more fully below.

### **The Apathetic Parole Agent**

Julie has had two different parole officers since her release. She casts her first parole agent as helpful because he knew about community resources and told her about SCTH, but her second parole agent was a "rookie" who did not help her secure housing after her mother returned home. Of her first agent, she states:

I walk into his office, he had a file system. He had stuff in there..he could whip out something and figure out..'hey, you got (an) address or whatever of someone?' and bam, bam, bam! He had it together. He was very nice...He told me about SCTH.

Julie considered her second PO a “rookie” because she did not know about community resources and asserts, “I had to literally do her job for her.” Moreover, her second PO told her she was on the waiting list to get into SCTH, but when she called the SCTH director, Melinda, she was told that they had never heard of her:

So I’m asking Melinda, ‘Can I get the number to give my parole officer (to get on the waiting list)?’ She goes, ‘No, your parole officer has it.’ And I said, ‘Well, my parole officer is a rookie.’ So Melinda started laughing and was cool enough to give the information. So now I got to tell the parole officer her job, which she didn’t like. She said, ‘Oh no, I already got you on the waiting list.’ I said, ‘Look, I thought the same thing,’ ... I had to choose my words real carefully, and I said, ‘I thought the same thing and then I found out this.’ I said, ‘I have the information for you.’

In order for Julie to have a place at SCHH, the request had to come through the parole officer. Julie suspected that her officer never called SCTH in the first place, because she didn’t want the extra paperwork. Specifically, her parole officer had found her a place in a 90 day drug treatment facility, and, according to Julie, did not want the hassle of finding her another residence.<sup>74</sup> But from Julie’s perspective, SCTH was the best option because it offered housing for a year. This was an important benefit since Julie’s family did not live in the state where she was required to live. Moreover, she didn’t believe the program would help her with her recovery. According to Julie, “I wouldn’t pick that program, because I’ve dropped women off there. You come out of there with more drug

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<sup>74</sup> Julie is able to return to her former union position after a year of drug treatment classes.

connections than you do coming in. It's just a meat market." So Julie called SCTH every other day waiting for a bed to become available. She states:

So when it did happen, and (the parole agent) called me, I was all excited, and she was...it was the first time that she had been pleasant with me...I also educated her on her stuff because when I went in her parole office, there was nothing there...nothing in her files. So when she finally came and saw me a couple weeks ago, I said, 'Well, would you like a tour?' I gave her a tour of the place...so that way she got to see what the hell is going on.

Like Julie, Mary's agent seemed unconcerned with her unstable housing situation and encouraged her mother to leave her without money or housing. According to Mary, the agent told her mother, "Your daughter needs a little tough love; she needs to grow up and take responsibility for her life... He thought that (my mother) was doing too much for me, making it too easy."

Although Mary explained that she left the drug treatment program because she was afraid of her roommate, her agent believed that she left because she wanted to be with her mom. So he quit approving her travel passes and promised her mother that he'd find her a bed someplace. After her mother left:

He got his partner (to take me)..he said 'Okay, we're going to take you and drop you off in a mission'...Okay, well I've never been homeless in my life. And I'm like, 'A what?' And I'm trying to be humble ...And I was panicking a little, but I'm thinking, 'Okay but I'm not going back to prison so I'll do what you say.' So on the way I'm like, 'Why can't you just put me in a program?' And he said, 'Well honestly with the budget cuts and you've been testing clean, so you know. If you would have tested dirty maybe we could have got you into a program.' And he had called SCTH but they were full at that point in time. And so he dropped me off in front of this mission and told me to go get a bed for a couple weeks and that my parole officer was going on vacation and he would see me in two weeks...I was scared but his partner said, 'You're as old as I am. Go in there.' So I went in there and they told me that they didn't have any beds, and they sent me to this other place... I walk in there and there's a lot of people, and I'm like, 'Oh my god, all these people are homeless!' And I'm scared at that

point... So anyways, they told me that I needed to check in at 9 o'clock every morning. And I'm like, 'What do I do? Where do I stay?' (They said) 'Well, we can tell you places that will feed you, but other than that we don't know what to do for you.' And I was honest, told them I was on parole, that I can only stay within 50 miles... Some of them they could send to farther places away, but I couldn't go because of my parole, I have to stay in a certain area. So I called my parole agent and said, 'I'm going to be homeless until you get back. I don't know what to do, please help me get into a program.' And he said, 'Not if you're going to walk away the way you walked away over there.' And I kept telling him, 'No, you don't understand what happened over there.'

At this point in time, Mary tried to call her mother, but her mother refused to provide her with additional assistance because of what the parole agent said. Mary explains:

And so I'm calling my mom. I'm like, 'Oh my god, oh my god, mom!' And she's like, 'He said that you would leave the place, that you wouldn't stay at the mission because you think you're too good for it.' And when he came back, he told my mother, 'Well yeah, I kinda knew that there wouldn't be a bed, but she could check in every morning at 9am and she was gonna get a bed.'

Since Mary had no money and no place to go, she went outside the mission and started crying. At this point, a 63-year old woman approached her and asked if she'd like to sleep on her couch. Mary thought that the woman "looked safe enough" and that she was offering her a couch in her home. However, the woman walked her down to the riverbed where the homeless stay. Mary remembers:

There was a little shanty underneath the freeway and her husband was there and they lived like nothing I've ever seen in my life... like under a bridge! There was garbage everywhere, they had a little barbecue outside, their place was cardboard, like something you would see in Tijuana years ago. But they were the nicest people in the world. They said, 'Come on in, we're going to feed you. Here's some clothes that might fit you.' It wasn't storybook land, let me tell you. But without these people, I could have been beaten, killed... I don't know where I would have stayed. I wouldn't have been safe.

Mary reports counting down the days until her officer returned from vacation. She recalled that he could not put her in a program because she'd been testing clean, so she decided to use methadone the night before he returned to ensure a spot in a program. She

remembers being afraid of wanting to use again, after trying it that night. But her fear of homelessness was even greater, so she opted to use the drug. She said,

I'm the kind of addict that once I start. I won't stop, I won't stop, I won't stop. And when I did it that night, I was afraid for myself, that I wouldn't go see my officer, I wouldn't tell him what I did, why I did it, and everything else, but I did. I told him, 'I'm dirty.' He goes, 'Well, I have you into a place, so I'm not going to test you.'

It was at this point that her officer took her to SCTH.

Although Mary's parole agent found her a bed at SCTH, she did not consider him helpful. He interfered with her relationship with her mother, who then withdrew financial and emotional support. He complained about the paperwork associated with placing her in a new program and left her at a shelter without a bed. Mary had never lived on the streets before and was consequently very fearful. Finally, he explained that she would have to do drugs again in order to get into a program, which can be considered an irresponsible statement given her history of drug addiction and put it put her in danger of being incarcerated again. Moreover, it is not an accurate statement because SCTH is not a drug treatment program. Residents do not have to be recovering addicts. And while he clearly did not serve as a broker of community resources, it can also be argued that he neglected to keep the community safe since her relapse could have led to additional criminal behavior.

Roberta, who never reported to her agent because she went straight to the streets and started drinking, first met her parole agent when he picked her up from jail on a

parole violation.<sup>75</sup> When asked if she felt he was sensitive to her needs, she stated, “They don’t have no money. The state doesn’t have nothing for us. Other people (elsewhere) have parole officers that provide them with food vouchers and bus tokens, but they don’t have that for us...They say that the state don’t have no money.” He visited her several times at SCTH. When asked what a typical visit is like, she explains, “He just tells me to keep up the good work and asks me what I want to do when I get out of here, and I ask him when I’m getting out of here.” Importantly, while he does ask her about her goals for the future, he has not taken any steps to help her to obtain them. Although Roberta told him of her desire to take computer classes, she remained unsure of how to actualize that goal.

Jennifer also reports a lack of assistance from her parole agent. When she was first released from prison, she checked in with her agent who recommended that she find a shelter to stay in. She asked for bus tokens, to which her agent responded that he did not have any bus tokens to give her. It was another agent, down the hall, who overheard, and offered her five dollars so that she could get back to the shelter. Since that time, she never returned for his assistance. She explains that the reason she has not sought his assistance is, “because of what happened when I first got on parole. I went there and he said ‘We don’t have housing, we don’t have bus tokens, we don’t have nothing. But we want you to come every month and report.’ I thought they were going to put me in some sort of housing or something, and not even a bus token.” She recalls being angry when she found out about SCTH, which she was referred to by a nonprofit organization that serves

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<sup>75</sup> A warrant had been issued for her arrest because she never reported to her agent.

the homeless. She stated, “and they [parole agents] were all shocked about this house... Well, how is this house here and I wasn’t in it?”<sup>76</sup> Jennifer perceives her agent to be unhelpful, but he may not be well-trained and his inability to assist her with her basic needs likely reflects a lack of funding as opposed to his lack of care. Moreover, the fact that another agent offered her money to take the bus back to the shelter shows that agents have discretion in the level and kinds of support they provide to parolees, leading to unequal service provision across agents.

Like Jennifer, Erica thought parole agents were supposed to help parolees access housing, jobs, and community resources, but she found out otherwise. She has had three different parole agents, and they each have their own approach. When asked if her officer has been sensitive to her needs, she states:

Yes, the one I have now totally one hundred percent is what I imagine a parole officer to do. He’s my third one I’ve had within a year and a half. My very first one was a female and she was above and beyond strict. As soon as I got out, I went to her for help. I’m thinking, ‘What am I going to do? What do I need to do? How am I going to find a job?’ I’m a parolee; do you know how hard it is to get a job when you’ve got a record?’ She said, ‘Ah, something will come your way.’ That was her attitude...she said, ‘No one else seems to have a problem.’ Well, they’re men, number one. And I asked her, ‘How many females do you have on your high control list?’ And she goes, ‘You’re the only one.’ There it is, there. You’re going to treat me like you treat your men? She said, ‘Yeah.’ And a simple thing like, ‘Ok, well obviously I don’t have a car, I don’t have wheels. Can you give me a bus pass, a token, something?’ .... ‘No, we don’t do that. Figure it out.’ She treated me as she treated anybody on high control. I was to test, I was to report, and she would come to my house, just show up, search my whole room. Go through everything and very meticulous in that sense, but offered no help, no support, like any job resources, any kind of information out there for me. No, no, no.

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<sup>76</sup>This is a good question. SETH serves parolees and is funded through the Department of Corrections.

Erica went to prison for assaulting her boyfriend after finding him in bed with another woman, so she views herself as different from male high-control parolees. As such, she thought her officer should relate to her as “a human” instead of a violent criminal. Moreover, she believed that women have fewer employment opportunities, which her first parole agent should have recognized. It wasn’t until she was transferred to her third officer that she received help. She even identifies him as one of her greatest sources of support since leaving prison. She explains:

My second one that I had was just the opposite (from the first)...super laid back. ‘Don’t bother me, I won’t bother you. Stay out of my way, I’ll stay out of yours.’ This one that I have now... he found me this place, he told me about job fairs, he told me about groups, anger management and stress management, things like that. And just like casual. Not even like, ‘This is what you need to do.’ And he’ll call me, like ‘Hey how you doing? You all right? You need anything? How’s your job?’ Like that. The only one.<sup>77</sup>

Similar to Lynch’s (1998) study, the officers responded to Erica in a variety of different ways; they were not all “waste managers.” Some were more helpful than others, as in Jennifer’s case when her parole agent’s colleague provided her with \$5 to get home. For the most part, however, the support the women identified as helpful did not consist of tangible items like bus tokens or information about community resources. As the next section shows, for a parole officer to be considered “sensitive to one’s needs” he or she needed to voice words of encouragement, verbal praise, and understanding. Yet their stories also exemplify the discretion accorded parole agents with regard to sending a parolee to prison for a violation of parole.

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<sup>77</sup> Erica was the only woman to report receiving this kind of assistance from her parole officer.



## **The Agent of Encouragement**

For two of the women, a helpful agent encourages and assists them to reunite with their children. Susan portrays her agent as helpful because, “He’s proud of me. He encourages me. He says how good I’ve been doing and he lowered me from high-control.” However, he also wrote a letter telling the courts how good she was doing so that she can be granted visitation rights. Likewise, Felicia calls her agent, “the bomb” because she was willing to, “take one of her Saturdays to take me to my mom’s house so I could visit with my son while she’s there. Parole agents don’t monitor child visits. But she was willing to do that.” Her agent never actually monitored a visit, but the willingness to do so is what Felicia appreciated.

Interestingly, sometimes the actions of the agent did not correspond with their portrayal as “sensitive to my needs.” Women who portrayed “pleasant” agents as “good” agents often reported being mistreated in their past, either in a relationship or in prison, and this may be why a friendly agent is deemed a good agent, even when the parole agent does not offer tangible support.<sup>78</sup> Janet, who struggles with bipolar schizophrenia and was severely beaten as a child and as an adult, first went to prison at the age of 50. When she was released from prison, she was told to report to her agent within 24 hours, but within that timeframe, she wound up in the emergency room for an intestinal problem. After she was released, she chose not to report to her agent because she was afraid of going back to prison. After absconding for a year and a half, the police picked her up

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<sup>78</sup> The relationship between parole officer and parolee are hierarchical. In prison, the women report being told that their needs don’t matter. Thus, a friendly PO may be perceived as especially nice because of former experiences with those in power.

because they noticed her on the streets too much. After spending a week in jail, her agent picked her up. Janet recalls being grateful to her agent because she took the time to check out Janet's story. After verifying that she had been in the hospital, her agent chose to take her to a program instead of sending her to prison for absconding. Janet recalls:

When she looked at it, everything was true that I told her, and it was my first time. I was a first timer so that kinda helped me too. She got me right out of jail and brought me here, got me hooked up to here, because I was on the streets so she didn't want to see me out on the streets no more. I thought that was very sweet of her...she is a really good lady.

In Janet's case, she thought the agent was primarily in place to supervise her behavior and test her for drugs. Instead, she found her parole agent to be very encouraging. She doesn't mind seeing her agent because, "She just smiles ear to ear when she sees me..she says I had changed a little more for the good. You know, she would say, 'Look at you, you look better and better every time I see you.' ...she is always smiling and everything.. and she likes to see my certificates when I complete something." In addition to the words of encouragement she receives, her agent also referred her to the psychiatrist at the parole office and the social worker. Her agent, "understands mental health people, probably more than anyone else would...like where we're coming from when we talk and stuff. Sometimes we have a hard time explaining ourselves."

Although Janet believes that her parole officer understood the significance of her mental illness, my ethnographic observations suggest that she would have lost services if not for the assistance of SCTH social workers. Specifically, when the state decided to remove low-risk parolees from active parole, Janet received a letter advising her that she would need to seek services in the community; that she'd no longer be able to get

medicine through the parole office. The letter didn't even include a list of community service providers. Given Janet's mental illness, she would not have been able to secure treatment if not for the assistance of social workers at SCTH. Moreover, after SCTH had enrolled her at the Department of Mental Health, the doctor advised us that she had been given incorrect medications by the parole office. The shakes and daily seizures Janet experienced were the consequence of the medication provided by the parole office. Her seizures had become so bad that she was hospitalized several times. While Janet's agent was encouraging and did place Janet in a program instead of prison or the streets, one could argue that she would have gone without mental health treatment if not for the support of SCTH.

Teresa considers her agent to be helpful because he suggested SCTH instead of the program she had found for herself. While he has not provided her with job leads or housing options for when she is released from parole, she still considers him to be helpful because, "no news is good news." Yet according to my ethnographic observations, she would not have started college or attained services from the rehabilitation department if not for the information she received at SCTH. Teresa was unable to start college sooner, because her agent did not reveal the information to her or take the time to ask her about her goals. Moreover, when she was "written up" for getting into an altercation with another resident and a staff member, she went in to see her agent, and he created animosity within her against the staff at SCTH. He told her, "I see you've been getting into trouble. Your name keeps coming across my desk." She then felt that the staff were writing her up and calling her agent without her knowledge and without the chance for

her to defend herself. In actuality, she had only been written up once. She suddenly felt “unsafe” at the halfway house because she could wind up in prison again for these “write-ups.” In truth, she would not wind up in prison for a “write-up” because she was not involved in criminal activity. However, the agent posed the house as the “bad guy” who wrote her up, while he framed himself as the “good guy” who listened to her and understood why she was in a verbal fight with someone. He promised to let her off parole if she would just continue to stay at SCTH a little while longer, as opposed to leaving to live in motels. According to Teresa, he believed in her; believed she could exit parole soon. Yet, on the side, he told me, “Maybe you can find her some anger management classes.”

In this case, the agent manipulated the situation so that Teresa would willingly stay in a safe, free environment. As a consequence, she lost the trust she had in the halfway house staff and became resistant to their assistance. She then refused to acknowledge her role in the altercation, because “the agent sees my side.”<sup>79</sup> Moreover, she was unable to see the help she did receive from social work interns and staff because she was convinced that they had been reporting her activities as a trouble maker to her agent.

Both of these examples demonstrates how little an agent must do to be deemed a “good” agent by some of the women in my study. The expectations for assistance are low because agents are often perceived as “cops” rather than “social workers” and because of

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<sup>79</sup> Teresa often fought with her roommates over control of the living situation. One of her roommates wet her bed because she was so fearful of Teresa.

the lack of support generally provided to low-income people. However, this is also related to the focus on oneself that is encouraged in many drug treatment programs, the increasing shift toward rehabilitative programs that focus on the offender, and a cultural rhetoric of personal responsibility (Haney 2004; Haney 2010). The messages that prisoners receive is increasingly focused on their failures, and the need for them to “see their own role” and to “take responsibility” and to build their self esteem.<sup>80</sup>

### **The Return to Prison: If you go in with nothing, you leave with nothing**

As has been discussed most of the women were uncertain of how they would meet their basic needs after release from prison. Parole terms that dictate the city or state that a parolee must live exacerbate their disadvantage since it can separate them from family members and result in anxiety, panic, and homelessness. Further, aside from words of encouragement, parole agents did little to provide assistance to their charges. It is therefore not surprising that most of the women I interviewed attributed high recidivism rates to a lack of opportunity. When Erica thought she’d be homeless after release from prison, she was given advice from “druggies” who told her how to survive:

What you do is you get out, and you go and get emergency General Relief,<sup>81</sup> that’s 200 bucks [per month]. You buy a stack (of drugs) and you flip it. Then you just stay at a motel because they charge you by the week and you’re fine. Why risk going back? You need money...and it’s quick money. Just like they told me. Flip that 200. Easy. You do it in a night.

Erica’s girlfriend had tried to live “straight” and even sought a forklift certificate, but no one would hire her, so “she went back to what she knows.” Likewise, Mary remembers seeing a lot of people from prison at the riverbed. She states, “They got out of prison,

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<sup>80</sup> Fieldnotes and interviews

<sup>81</sup> Cash aid for homeless

they couldn't find a job, so they went back to their old ways. It's like a cycle. They can't get a job, they go back to their old ways."

Felicia asserts that many parolees resort to crime because they don't have other options. One of her friends is in a drug rehabilitation program, but is not an addict. She spent 38 years in prison, and was released to a drug program because she needed housing. Felicia explained, "It's not that she needs help for drugs, it's just that she don't have nowhere else to go." Unfortunately, there wasn't an alternative program available that would have helped her to hone her skills. Instead she attends drug treatment groups for eight hours a day.

The exception to the argument that a lack of opportunity leads to prison came from Teresa. She believes that most people do return to prison because of a lack of housing and jobs, but that some former prisoners aren't ready to change, specifically those who are using drugs. She asserts that there are drug programs out there, but that many former prisoners are not ready to change. It is notable that none of the women believed that criminality continued because of a desire to engage in criminal activities, but that there were circumstances that led women back to crime, from addiction to a lack of opportunity. Similar to existing studies of women ex-offenders (O'Brien 2001; Jurk 1983; Richie 2001), my respondents believed it was nearly impossible to stay out of prison without a means of income, stable housing, access to drug treatment and a strong desire to remain sober.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I explored the experiences of women as they left prison in order to better understand how they came to live at SCHH, a facility that exerts significant social control over their residents. I sought to determine why women who were not mandated to a “program” would choose to live in an environment that monitored their daily activities. The narratives told in this chapter reveal that the majority of women at SETH had no place else to live, and that most of them had not secured accommodations, services, or job training before release. Without family or friends who could offer support, many of the women turned to their parole agents for help. Yet, most parole agents were described as apathetic to the parolee’s status as homeless, even though being homeless put her at risk for recidivism. Those that were characterized in a positive light offered praise and verbal encouragement, but did not offer tangible assistance like bus tokens or help them to enroll in computer classes. Lastly, this chapter revealed that most of the women attribute high recidivism rates to a lack of resources and opportunity for women on parole. This chapter supports existing research and suggests that budget cuts that restrict food, housing, drug treatment, and job training will likely result in higher crime rates.

## CHAPTER V

### IN JUDGEMENT OR IN SOLIDARITY: THE FLUIDITY OF FOLK THEORIES

#### Introduction

My goal is just to help (residents) avoid the worst evils. The world is not a friendly place, the world is not an easy place to negotiate, and the best that a person can hope for is to stay out of the way of the worst of the evildoers. In the case of these women, to stay out of the way of the police, the parole agent, and all those people that want to do nothing but evil to them. My whole work with the women is to try to manipulate around, and subvert, and find a way through, so that they don't get hurt yet one more time. So I don't know that I would call this any sort of ideal program. I would call it their last gasp chance.

-Helen, LSCW and intern supervisor

When I tell my friends that I went to children's court with one of my clients, and that she sat in the front, they're like, "She didn't sit in the back? She wasn't handcuffed? Oh my God, are you okay?" And I'm like, "You know, they're people." I think we forget that. Even social workers forget that. I was afraid when I first came here. The media shows these violent out-of-control people that are in handcuffs all the time.

-Cheryl, social work intern

These two quotes reveal very different assumptions about female offenders. Helen portrays the residents at SECOND CHANCES as victims whereas Cheryl thought of them as perpetrators. Cheryl's assumptions are not surprising. Although the average female offender is incarcerated for a nonviolent offense, the general population tends to assume that criminals are violent (Britton 2003). Crimes are also commonly viewed as the result of "bad" choices by those who are unable to control their urges (Haney 2004),



although research indicates that the average female offender commits crime in a context of economic disadvantage (Bloom 2003). By focusing on the individual, reformation of the “self” becomes the focus of penal systems rather than reformation of society and structural change (Maidment 2006; McCorkel 2003).

In the previous chapter, I discussed the factors that led women to reside at SECOND CHANCES. Most had received little-to-no preparation prior to their release from prison and would have been homeless if not for the halfway house. In this chapter, I discuss the interns’ assumptions about women on parole. Their assumptions are strikingly different from the reality of the residents’ lives. Specifically, the interns began their work at SECOND CHANCES under the assumption that criminal offenders have character flaws that led them to prison and a halfway house. Their assumptions were quite different from Helen and Melinda, who highlighted structural conditions that hindered reentry. While the interns initially resisted helping clients who they considered to be “manipulative” and “irresponsible,” by the end of the internship, they identified a multitude of challenges that the residents faced, including poverty, the inability to access mental health treatment, and the lack of reentry programs. Nevertheless, they still espoused a belief in a “social gap” between themselves and their clients and they suggested that we help women reenter society by offering resources *and* counseling services. Thus, the interns advocated for reformation of the self although they recognized that structural conditions hindered their clients’ ability to gain employment and to refrain from engaging in additional crime.

## **The Rise of the Therapeutic State**

As has been discussed, the penal philosophy has shifted from an emphasis on rehabilitation to an emphasis on punishment. This philosophy is based, in part, on the assumption that criminals are rational decision makers whose choices are based on self-interest and the desire for money or power; punishment thus dissuades them from making decisions that lead to crime and sends a message to the greater society that criminal behavior does not pay (McCorkel 2003). The framing of criminals as rational decision makers diverts our attention from structural explanations toward individualistic explanations of criminal behavior; it thus diverts attention from societal incentives to commit crime and the unequal distribution of legitimate opportunities to achieve broadly held goals such as making a decent living given the inequalities in the labor market (Maidment 2006). However, the “individual” has a gender. Because men are expected to be powerful and financially successful and violent, their crimes are socially expected in contrast to women criminals, who are constructed as the true deviants (Britton 2003; McCorkel 2003; Maidment 2006).

Because female offenders have violated norms of femininity in addition to breaking the law, their crimes have been by researchers as needing “special” explanation. Nineteenth-century criminologists, for example, posited that the “brains and bodies of women criminals” had become “masculinized” (Britton 2003). More recently, prison staff, “contrast the economic aspect of men’s crimes with the baseness and “sickness” of women’s crimes (McCorkel 2003:69). In her study of a prison program for women,

McCorkel (2003) found that prison staff attributed female criminality to psychological deficits. While men might sell drugs to make money, women “degrade themselves” and must have “something wrong on the inside.” Although the average female inmate is more economically disadvantaged than her male counterpart, and although most have experienced sexual and physical abuse, administrators focused on the inmates’ “diseased” selves and sought to control their behavior with heightened surveillance and therapeutic intervention.

The prevalence of therapeutic intervention is not restricted to prisons. In fact, it is more pronounced within community-based correctional facilities, which are often managed by staff who have been trained in psychological counseling (Haney 2010). Feminist scholars of the state have asserted that the incorporation of therapy in prison settings indicates a form of state punishment which, “emerged to restrain the presumably out-of-control impulses of disorderly groups” (Haney 2010:117). Therapeutic approaches are thus used as a technique of governance, “used to manage psychological and emotional conduct in ways that align with the aims of government.” Correctional programs based on this logic “break down” women through confrontation and criticism with the goal of transforming them into autonomous, responsible individuals who make the “right” choices (McCorcal 2003; Haney 2010).

### **Independence and Responsibility**

Of course, before offenders can make the right choices, they must understand and admit to the poor choices they’ve made in the past, which is exactly what they are

encouraged to do. For the last fifteen years, the subjects of welfare and penal policies have been portrayed as “needing to own up to the bad decisions they made” (Haney 2004:344). Whereas women offenders were once, “cast as victims in need of care by a paternalistic state, this narrative has been dislodged by a discourse of personal responsibility” in which women’s choices are used as evidence of their character flaws (Haney 2004:345). The discourse of personal responsibility is coupled with a dependency discourse, which condemns women for a failure to be self-reliant.

For example, McCorkel (2004) found that drug war policies transformed punishment practices in a women’s prison, which ultimately altered staff assumptions about female criminality. When she first began her study, dependency was valorized, as long as an inmate was dependent on a “good” man. The purpose of reforming inmates was so that they would attract good men and thus be part of a supportive, healthy relationship. However, as “get tough” policies permeated the penal system, the prison staff sought to “habilitate” inmates by encouraging self-reliance and by holding them accountable for their choices. The problem with the inmates was that, “they’re working the system, welfare, criminal justice...and they can’t get it together because they’ve become dependent on this system we’ve set up” (McCorkel 2004:401).

Taken together, discourses of dependence and personal responsibility focus on individual failure and obscure the role that material inequities play in encouraging criminal activity. Haney (2004:346) refers to this as “discursive domination” in which subjects are instructed that the “revolution must come from within.” Consequently, the

state is absolved of its role in social reform, because individuals are held responsible for their plight while structural inequities are disregarded.

### **Institutional Variation**

While feminist scholars have identified dominant discourses that permeate welfare-penal regimes, they also emphasize the importance of observing policy implementation, which reveals the ways in which policies are integrated into institutional practice. As stated by Haney (2004:348),

By disentangling policy intentions and effects, studies of state institutions have exposed critical points of disjuncture in the construction and reception of state reform projects; they reveal how, after being translated and filtered through institutions and actors, these projects can take on new meanings. The result is a more nuanced picture of how states govern social relations than one would get from policy analysis alone—it is often a picture of competing institutions staffed by conflicted actors who use contrasting control tactics to relay variable messages to their diverse clientele.

Haney suggests that state actors do not passively implement policy, but that the way in which policy is implemented is partly based on the assumptions staff hold with regard to the population they work with. Horowitz (1996:45) uses the term “folk theories” to represent caseworkers’ assumptions about clients, their needs, and what their client’s relationship to the larger social world should be. As stated by Horowitz (1996:44), the personnel at social service agencies, “communicate their views of the social world in which the young women must try to find or make a place,” and they “translate what they see as the goals of the organization into what they do and say” to their clients. In Horowitz’s study, caseworker assumptions influenced the nature of the caseworker-client

relationship; “arbiters” created a hierarchical relationship between themselves and their clients whereas “mediators” assumed an authoritative role but did not presume to control the women’s life choices. Likewise, in Britton’s (2003) study, correctional guards infantilized the inmates and thereby cast themselves as superior to their wards.

Much attention has been directed toward the identification of folk theories and the ways in which these are transformed by state policy. However, there are few studies that investigate such changes within non-profit institutions that receive state contracts to provide services. The purpose of this chapter is to highlight the divergent folk theories held by interns and social workers at SECOND CHANCES. The interns initially believed the women had been incarcerated as a consequence of character flaws and they resisted helping the women because they were worried about encouraging client dependence. In contrast, Helen and Melinda pointed to the residents’ structural disadvantage to explain their criminality. Interestingly, the interns’ folk theories were not static but changed over the course of their internship regarding the social factors that impeded reentry. They believe this change occurred because they were able to observe the obstacles that former female prisoners faced first-hand, and because of the lessons they learned from supervision. However, although the interns rejected their initial assumptions, they still believed that residents might make bad decisions if they were granted too much freedom, and they therefore justified the hierarchal power relations evident at SECOND CHANCES.

## **Assumptions about Women on Parole: Interview Data**

In my observations of interns and Melinda and Helen, it became clear that the interns and the supervisors held different assumptions about the nature of the residents. Similar to existing research on welfare and penal institutions, the interns' assumptions reflected concern over client dependence and a belief that residents needed to take greater personal responsibility for their actions. In addition, each of the interns in my study started their internship at SECOND CHANCES with preconceived notions regarding the nature of "criminals." Their attitudes are not unlike those of the general population, who tend to view prisoners as masculine and violent (Britton 2003). Coupled together, these assumptions reflect the interns' initial "folk theory" (Horowitz 1996). In this section I draw on interview data to discuss their assumptions regarding "criminals." I then discuss their concerns regarding dependence and personal responsibility, which is based on my observations and interactions with interns. It is important to note that interns' assumptions changed over the course of their internships, which will be discussed in the second part of this chapter.

Cheryl, a 22 year old Iranian-American MSW student, discussed her fear of working with women on parole and stated that others were fearful for her, as well.

I thought that (the residents) would be violent. When you say this internship to anyone they're automatically like, 'How are you doing this? Are you carrying pepper spray around with you? Have you been attacked yet? Are there guns?' Like all these automatic crazy associations and obviously I came in with that same stereotype, too...it was very awkward in the beginning too. You don't know what you're supposed to do. Can you touch them?

Cheryl thinks her ideas about criminals were a consequence of a lack of exposure, because she lived in an affluent area. Her assertion conflates crime with poverty. However, she believed her ideas were also the result of the way TV shows portrays criminals. She stated, “When you see this stuff on TV, you see these people that are portrayed as violent and out of their minds and what they did was their fault; justice has been served. And you sit there and you watch this on TV, and you’re like, ‘Yep put them in prison. Get them out of here. I don’t want my kids around that.’”

Denise, a 50 year old African American woman, also started the internship thinking of offenders as more masculine than non-offenders. Like Cheryl, her ideas about the residents at SECOND CHANCES were based on gendered notions associated with criminals, and she felt most of her ideas came from the mainstream media. She explained, “I actually thought they were all going to be these really big, husky people and that all of them would look like little dudes.”

Nancy and Yvonne also started their internship with assumptions about the women at SECOND CHANCES, but their views were different than Cheryl and Denise. Their ideas reflect the discourse of responsibility that permeates our welfare and penal systems and emphasizes punishment rather than assistance or rehabilitation (Haney 2004). This discourse emphasizes the personal failings and bad decisions made by offenders as opposed to the disadvantage and victimization female inmates have faced. As stated by Nancy, a 55 year old Caucasian woman, “Most of us, myself included before I came here, have the attitude that they deserve whatever comes their way; they deserve



whatever they get. When I came here, I thought I'd be working with women who just got out of jail, who were always looking for something bad to do. And I'd say, 'Don't do the crime, if you can't do the time.'”

Yvonne, a 26 year old Latina, worked with mostly male parolees for two years before she decided to earn her Masters in Social Work. In her position, she often interacted with parole officers, which influenced what she initially thought of the women at SECOND CHANCES. She reports thinking, “Oh, she is just going back to her old ways, or (I thought) she's not motivated to get her life back together,” which she had heard parole officers say. In her former position, she thought she was “serving her community” by supervising parolees and thereby keeping her community safe. Both Yvonne and Nancy focused on individual responsibility rather than considering structural barriers to upward mobility and “making ends meet” that the women encountered. For them, the difference between “them” and “us” was not a reflection of opportunity structures; it was a moral and behavioral distinction between those who made good choices and those who made bad choices, consistent with the dominant discourses about crime that focus on reforming individuals rather than reforming society (Maidment 2006).

### **Folk Theories about Women on Parole: Ethnographic Data**

In my interactions with the interns, they tended to portray the women as manipulators of others who lacked motivation to work, made bad choices in life, and were still not ready to change for the better. Denise explained to me that her career goal

was to be a probation officer for juvenile offenders because she wanted to work with them at a young age when, “she could still make a difference.” She felt that most of our clients simply were not ready to make a change and that there was little that we could do to help them because they had to make the choice to turn their lives around. She thus viewed residents as less likely to change than youthful offenders. Clearly her folk theory closely resembled the discourse of personal responsibility so prevalent in welfare and penal policies as well as addiction recovery programs (McCorkel 2004; Haney 2010).

The way Denise described Kendra’s behavior is another example of her “folk theory” (Horowitz 1996). Kendra, an African American non-violent drug offender in her early twenties, lived at SECOND CHANCES because the terms of her parole dictated that she reside in the county where she committed her offense. The only people Kendra knew in the county were fellow drug users, so she could not reside with them, and was therefore placed at SECOND CHANCES. Her desire was to move to the northern part of the state, where her sister, mother, partner and three year old daughter lived. She also had a job lined up with a salary of \$12 an hour. Kendra asked her parole officer to request a transfer to the county where her family and job awaited her. Given her job and family up north, Kendra expected to be transferred out of the county and became very excited. However, several days later her parole agent called to tell her that her transfer was

denied. Kendra promptly left SECOND CHANCES, and after she failed to return by the next morning, staff called her parole agent, and a warrant was issued for her arrest.<sup>82</sup>

When Denise and I discussed Kendra's situation during supervision, Helen told us that transfers are rarely approved because parole agents do not want to accept additional parolees on their caseload. I wondered what we could have done differently in this situation, so I asked if we should have prepared Kendra for that possibility and if we should have looked for alternative living arrangements at an institution that permitted children. Denise interjected that Kendra was just using her daughter as an excuse to leave SECOND CHANCES; she wasn't really ready to live a law-abiding life. Although none of us knew where Kendra went or what she was doing, Denise assumed that she left SECOND CHANCES to get high because she hadn't learned to deal with life's "triggers."

Shortly thereafter, Denise watched as I listened to Kristy talk about her life before prison. Kristy, who had been found guilty of kidnapping her daughter, explained that she took her daughter because her husband was an addict and because he had started bringing prostitutes home. She did not want her daughter raised in that environment, so she fled the country with her daughter in tow. Her husband had also abused her, and as she discussed it, she started crying. After Kristy returned to her room, Denise said that she was glad that I was not planning to become a social worker because I was liable to believe what clients told me and could therefore be easily manipulated. Denise believed

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<sup>82</sup> Kendra was not mandated to SECOND CHANCES, but if a parolee does not call her agent prior to relocating, a warrant can be issued for her arrest. This is because the agent must approve the living arrangements of all parolees.

that Kristy's story was a lie and that crying was a strategic attempt to manipulate me into believing her story.

Cheryl, who intends to work as a therapist at a university, also thought of the women as personal manipulators. Cheryl explained this to me one day after we talked with Susan. Like Kristy, Susan talked about her intimate relationships before her incarceration. Susan had been sexually molested from the age of three, and had recently realized that her drug use and romantic relationships were related to the abuse. She explained that she sought the biggest, hardest, toughest gang members as romantic partners because she had never felt safe as a child. She therefore looked for a man who could protect her as an adult. The irony, she explained, is that she had been physically abused by these men. In her drug treatment program, Susan had recently begun to understand that the abuse she experienced as a child was related to her substance abuse and relationship history. When Susan left the room, Cheryl explained that Susan had told us about her personal history in order to manipulate us; I asked what she was trying to manipulate us to do. Cheryl replied that we may not yet know what Susan wants from us, but that we would eventually find out. "All the women here are manipulators," she said.

The interns were also concerned that clients might become dependent on us. In our role as interns, we were responsible for assisting clients in locating doctors, dentists, housing assistance, and applying for disability insurance, school, identification cards, birth certificates, and treatment programs. We were therefore expected to make

telephone calls with the client using speakerphone, so that the client could model our interaction in the future. If a client had questions about how to fill out paperwork, like an application for housing assistance, we were asked to guide her through it. While the interns did not mind telling residents how to do these things, they did object to doing these tasks for them. The interns did not think of making calls and filling out paperwork with clients as an opportunity for them to learn to do it on their own; they felt that they were encouraging dependence.

For example, during supervision, Constance asked, “Shouldn’t we be teaching them to do it on their own?” Melinda explained that many social workers “look down” on offering too much help and that past interns have characterized the residents as “greedy.” Melinda and Helen, however, see the women as needy; and they consider themselves to be “proud enablers.” Melinda said that most of the women will start doing things on their own, after they’ve had the chance to observe us. She explained that some of the women had never used a computer, had difficulty reading, or were unsure how to navigate through agencies because of long prison terms, and these were the residents who often asked for help.

While past research on penal and welfare institutions has highlighted concern with women’s dependence (Haney 2004; McCorkel 2004), Melinda and Helen characterize assistance as a need that the women have, and they believe that observing our efforts would enable the women to be independent. The women had not had the opportunity to develop the skills that interns took for granted. Of course, making phone

calls with residents also taught inexperienced social work students about community resources. Moreover, during interviews, each of the interns complained that they were not given enough training before working with the residents. Thus, educated women, who knew how to use computers and were accustomed to navigating through the community, sometimes felt unprepared to assist clients. Yet they still thought of the women as lazy and unmotivated manipulators when they asked for help with tasks that the interns thought were relatively simple, like making telephone calls to obtain disability insurance.

### **Folk Theory: Helen and Melinda**

In contrast to the interns, who thought of the residents as women who had made poor choices in life, Melinda and Helen felt that our clients had few choices. Our clients were relatively powerless; they were victims of a capitalist, patriarchal society. During supervision, which lasted for two hours once a week, we discussed who we had worked with, what we had done, and Helen and Melinda would suggest how we should proceed with each client. However, they often told stories of former residents, which highlighted the difficulty parolees faced before and during reentry. We were told that we had to understand the “reality” our clients faced if we wanted to be effective. The reality was that our clients faced a multitude of barriers before and after their prison terms. These barriers included a lack of education, histories of personal traumas, difficulty obtaining housing or a job because of discrimination against criminals, mental illness, and addiction.

With regard to addiction, Melinda explained that telling addicts to “make the choice” to remain sober overlooked the power of addiction and the reason they became addicted in the first place. She launched into a story about the first time she led a recovery group at SECOND CHANCES. She recalled one particular woman who came to the group high each week. Melinda became frustrated and asked why she came to the group if she intended to keep using drugs. The woman replied that she attended the group because she was forced to, and that she had no intention to quit using drugs because, “being high was the only peace she’d ever known.” Melinda explained that most of us are under the assumption that if our clients quit using drugs, everything will get better, but that in fact, life gets worse. Once sober, the woman begins to recognize the harm she’s caused others and she has to face the pain that caused the addiction in the first place. In short, overcoming addiction is not an easy task or “choice.”

According to Helen, the “reality” of reentry affects clients after their “honeymoon” phase ends, usually within a couple of months after their arrival. Initially, they are excited to reconnect with family and plan to get a job and their own apartment.<sup>83</sup> Yet, by the time they leave prison, their families have often given up on them, so they find themselves without emotional or financial support. They also quickly realize that no one will hire them because of their criminal record. Others are banned from certain professions because of a felony conviction. She told us about a former resident who went into debt to become a massage therapist only to find out after graduating that she could

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<sup>83</sup> Elsewhere, scholars have described prisoners who have the “best intentions” at the time of release and have suggested that the recidivism rate would be lower if we provided resources and assistance at the point of reentry (Petersilia 2003). My interviews with residents and my fieldnotes support prior research and Helen’s assertion.

not work as a masseuse because of her conviction. She then owed thousands of dollars and could not get a job. Melinda added that the women tend to be stuck in low-wage jobs. “Earning minimum wage flipping burgers all day only serves a capitalist society. They’ll never get ahead,” she explained. The idea that parolees can find legitimate work if they try hard enough and that they can earn enough to meet their expenses is an unrealistic assumption, she asserted.

However, although Melinda and Helen discussed the powerlessness that our clients experienced in society, they often overlooked the powerlessness that residents experienced at SECOND CHANCES. For example some of the interns noticed that many of the women spent much of their day in bed instead of going to school or looking for work. In addition, sometimes the resident would have an appointment and an intern would be asked to take her to it, but the resident would resist getting out of bed. This frustrated the interns, who considered the residents to be lazy and inconsiderate. Melinda explained that many of them suffered from mental illnesses, for which they took medication, and that this made them drowsy. Unfortunately, our criminal justice system did not understand mental illness, which was not unlike, “most people, who think their behavior is willful, when it’s the result of mental illness.” However, although Melinda rejected the interns’ perception that the residents were unmotivated and inconsiderate, she failed to recognize that the residents’ might have resisted because they were told to attend an appointment. When residents had an appointment that they wanted to attend, they were ready on time. In contrast, when an appointment was made for them, they were more likely to be in bed when it was time to go.



The tendency to juxtapose a program founded on “feminist principles” of empowerment against disempowering prison programs is not uncommon (McKim 2008; Haney 2010; Maidment 2006). Yet most studies of empowering “women-centered” programs find that they utilize therapeutic techniques that are controlling and punitive. While SECOND CHANCES did not have a therapeutic component, the rules of the house tightly controlled most aspects of the residents’ lives, as discussed in Chapter 3.

### **Residents as Children**

Clearly, Melinda and Helen do not reflect the preoccupation with client dependence or individual failings found in other studies (Haney 2004). Yet, as with the correctional officers in Britton’s (2003) study, Melinda tended to infantilize the residents, especially those who were young or who were diagnosed with mental illness. Cindy, a 19 year old resident, was placed at SECOND CHANCES by her parole agent after she was arrested for prostitution. Cindy was not happy with her agent’s decision and would often complain about the house rules. The interns thought of her as difficult and uncooperative and when Melinda asked if someone would be willing to help her to apply for jobs, none of the interns volunteered. Melinda urged us to reconsider. She explained that Cindy’s attitude was typical of a teenager and that she must have had a terrible childhood to be on parole so young in life; Cindy was “crying out for a mother” and Melinda wanted to “wrap her in a blanket and rock her.” By infantilizing Cindy, Melinda avoided characterizing her as difficult and instead asserted that she had never been socialized or cared for by her mother.

We were also encouraged to assume a “mother” role when we took the residents to their appointments. We were expected to report the details during supervision; if we did not know the details we were subject to criticism. One of the interns took Janet, a 53 year old resident, to a doctor’s appointment. During supervision, Melinda asked about Janet’s blood pressure and glucose levels, but the intern could not recall what the doctor had said. Melinda told her, “You should have paid attention during the doctor’s appointment.” The intern apologized and explained that she did not know what questions to ask during the appointment. Melinda clarified, “Think of Janet as your kid. Do everything you would do if Janet was your child.” Melinda explained that she needed to know whether or not to regulate Janet’s diet because of her diabetes. While I believe that Melinda was genuinely concerned about Janet’s health, she wanted to know the details of the doctor’s appointment so that she could control Janet’s eating behavior, which I saw her do several times.<sup>84</sup>

Thus, by portraying residents as children, controlling the behavior of residents becomes justified because mothers are expected to supervise and guide their children. For example, Melinda withheld several of Margaret’s Supplemental Security Insurance checks because she was concerned that she would “blow her money” on things she didn’t need, like DVDs. At times, Melinda, in her role as a mother-figure, policed the way the women “did” gender (West and Fenstermaker 1987). For example, one day, as Cindy prepared to leave the house, Melinda saw her wearing shorts, felt they were too short and

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<sup>84</sup> One of the regulations SECOND CHANCES had to meet in order to receive funding was to prepare dishes that had been approved by a nutritionist.

demanded that she change before she left the house. Melinda also asked Margaret's parole agent to talk to her about leaving the house with "her tits hanging out."

Helen, in contrast, disagreed with Melinda's decision to control aspects of the residents' lives.<sup>85</sup> She felt that residents should be able to make their own decisions, even if we felt that those decisions were not in their best interest and even if those decisions negatively affected their health and well-being. Helen's folk theory characterized the women as powerless due to structural barriers and a lack of experience and opportunity. She also thought that residents should have the autonomy to make their own decisions, a belief not espoused in similar research.<sup>86</sup> In contrast, Melinda's folk theory identified structural limitations but she thought of the women as "children" who lacked the ability to make their own decisions and therefore needed the guidance and control of a "mother figure."

### **Intern Resistance**

As in Horowitz's (1996) study, the interns and supervisors at SECOND CHANCES did not share similar assumptions about their clients and this affected what the interns were willing to do with the residents. What was expected of the interns was based on Helen and Melinda's folk theories, which the interns did not embrace. The interns occasionally resisted by claiming to be "too busy" to work with a client. This was an effective technique because the resident would often quit asking the intern for help,

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<sup>85</sup> As director, Melinda made the final decisions.

<sup>86</sup> Similar research emphasizes the need to reform women, through therapeutic intervention, so that they do not continue to make bad decisions (Haney 2010).

though they did complain that “no one was helping” them, and they sometimes quit talking to the intern altogether. This irritated the interns, who thought that the residents had “bad attitudes” when they didn’t get their way.

The interns rarely expressed their frustration directly to Helen, who was responsible for reporting their performance to their universities. Moreover, they had the ability to choose who to work with and how to help them because Helen was only at SECOND CHANCES on Wednesdays, so she did not directly observe our tasks or our interactions with clients. When she was at SECOND CHANCES, she worked in the front of the house, in Melinda’s office, and the interns worked in the back of the house, at the dining table, or in their office, which was a small structure in the backyard. Thus, it was possible to decline client requests without Helen knowing about it. However, interns occasionally expressed their discontent with clients during supervision meetings with Helen. When this happened, the interns would complain about a resident, and then Helen would provide an alternate explanation for the client’s behavior. Although Helen never required an intern to “do” something she did not feel comfortable with, in each of these instances she encouraged us to “think” about the situation differently, and to consider the client’s perspective. Thus, interns had the freedom to act in accordance with their own folk theories, even though Helen did not agree with their assumptions.

For example, during supervision Cheryl asserted that she no longer wanted to drive residents to their appointments because they were not grateful, which meant that they now expected it. She explained that one of the residents, Tabatha, had asked for a

ride to pick up paperwork, but Cheryl had been too busy, and suggested that Tabatha take the bus. After Cheryl denied her request for a ride, Tabatha quit talking to her for the rest of the day. Cheryl became offended at Tabatha's "bad attitude" and thought that she was attempting to "bully" her. The women were "taking advantage of them" and "treating them like taxis." Helen presented an alternate explanation. She suggested that Tabatha might not know how to use the bus and might be afraid to get lost, which would explain her hesitancy to take the bus.<sup>87</sup> Perhaps Cheryl and Tabatha could take the bus together? Cheryl replied that she had shown Tabatha the bus schedule. Tabatha should now be able to take the bus by herself; Cheryl shouldn't have to actually take the bus with her.

Denise then complained that she had driven Crystal to court only to find out that she was not due in court. Denise was upset that Crystal couldn't get her schedule straight and considered her to be "irresponsible." Helen suggested that we work with Crystal to create a schedule so that she could keep track of her appointments. She reminded us that Crystal had lived on the streets prior to her incarceration and was not accustomed to keeping a schedule. Denise resisted, stating that Crystal should take the initiative to keep track of her own schedule.

While Helen suggested that these behaviors were a consequence of a skill deficit, the interns thought that the tasks were relatively easy and that the resident should be able to complete them independently. Although the interns were concerned that the residents were becoming dependent on the staff and interns, they overlooked the way in which the rules fostered dependence on them. Residents could leave the house without an itinerary

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<sup>87</sup> Residents who did not know the area often expressed anxiety about getting lost.

only if they were accompanied by an intern, they did not have to bring back proof of their whereabouts, and they were not questioned about their whereabouts when they returned. Moreover, for those who were placed on restriction, and for those who had been at SECOND CHANCES for two weeks or less, the only way they could leave the house was with an intern. Asking interns to take them places in the community enabled them to get out of the house<sup>88</sup> and they did not have to fill out paperwork, call-in, or keep track of time. Thus, relying on interns was a benefit because they could avoid the rules for a short period of time.<sup>89</sup>

Although the women interns at SECOND CHANCES started their internship with folk theories that framed the residents as dependent, irresponsible, manipulators, they did not voice these sentiments during the interviews at the end of the internship. In fact, they compared and contrasted their current view of the women with their former assumptions. In the next section, I discuss the change in the interns' folk theory and the reason they felt their assumptions changed.

### **Folk Theories as Fluid**

With rare exception, existing research on service providers' folk theories tends to identify folk theories at a specific point in time or discuss how these theories are shaped by state policy and the dominant discourses justifying that policy. For example, Horowitz (1996) identified two distinct folk theories that governed service providers' behavior, but

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<sup>88</sup> Residents often complained about having nothing to do and about being depressed from staying in the house all day.

<sup>89</sup> Several residents confirmed this to me.

she did not investigate if, when, and in what way individuals' folk theories about clients would change. McCorkel (2004) focused on the relationship between state policy and service providers' folk theories. In her study of a prison for women, state policies and institutional interpretive structures altered guards' assumptions about female offenders. While much scholarship focuses on the relationship between state policy and folk theories, Britton found that correctional guards' assumptions of criminals changed as a consequence of "proximity" which, "has a way of breaking down stereotypes and building relationships" (Britton 2003:107).

In my study, the interns stated that their viewpoints regarding the residents changed because they learned, by working with the residents and from participating in supervision, that they weren't simply unmotivated or making bad choices, but that many had experienced barriers prior to and after their incarceration that made reentry difficult. The interns felt that one of the reasons the women engaged in criminal behavior was because they were neglected, abused, or abandoned as children. Cheryl explained that she was initially hesitant to help Susan reunite with her children, until she learned about her past:

She introduced herself and was like, 'I want my kids back.' I was like, 'Let me see who you are.' I was a little bit hesitant because I didn't know her situation and I was like, 'What is her rap sheet like?' I sat down and read it, and I thought, 'I don't even know if she's stable.' But then when you start establishing that rapport, that alliance with them, you see, 'Wow this person basically grew up with a mother who was an addict and from the time she born [un]til she was 13, she was being sexually abused. And then she was with men who abused her. So when I got to know her better I realized that this is just a woman that wants a second chance. Yeah, she messed up, but she did the best that she could with what she

was given. She never had a mom to take care of her, no family members, and the only thing that she had were the men in her life that also told her, 'You're nothing,' and would abuse her and make things worse.

Cheryl explained that she developed a relationship with Susan and that she realized, "At the end of the day, they're just human beings, they're just like you. I think we forget that, and that's why there's no funding (for parolees)." As in Britton's study, by getting to know the residents, Cheryl started to think of them as "humans" instead of "violent criminals." While Cheryl recalled thinking that criminals needed to be in prison so that justice could be served, she now believes that women on parole are, "more of an oppressed population than any other population."<sup>90</sup> In fact, seven months into the internship she traveled to the state capital to protest a bill designed to cut funding to foster kids and increase funding for prisons. She stated:

The work that we do here is what got me so riled up, so I went up there. The government is trying to cut funds (for foster kids) and then put money into prisons. What (the governor) is really saying is, 'They're going to go to prison, so let's just vamp up and make the prison all nice by the time they get there. Let's not change the problem, let's not change the foster care system, or put funding into scholarships for them, or make their lives easier. It's like they think, 'Foster kids are going to end up in jail anyways.' And you know what? Half of our clients are foster children.

In addition to the rejection and abuse that residents experienced as children, the interns believed that poverty, illiteracy, and addiction encouraged the women's criminal behavior. They also believed that prisons did not address these issues and did little to help

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<sup>90</sup> During interviews, each of the interns stated that they would like to work with female offenders in the future, as a consequence of their time at SECOND CHANCES.



women prepare for the transition after they exited the prison walls. In anything, they viewed prisons as further increasing the residents' powerlessness. Denise stated:

I think they need to do some type of reentry program before they leave prison. Why can't they give them a birth certificate and a social security card and an ID before they leave? Because the prison ID that they have, they have to turn that in. So now they're walking around without an ID. But (as parolees), they're required to have an ID within a certain amount of time or else they can get violated [be reported for a violation]. Or police stop them, and if they have no ID, they're gonna think they have something to hide, and then these people get locked back up for something they had no control over in the first place.

Likewise, Yvonne asserted:

When they come out, they need to have an ID and somewhere for them to go. They need referrals. What exactly is being offered (in prison)? (Prison administrators) are more like, 'We'll see you in a few months.' So, I think we should find out what we can do while they're incarcerated, so that we can stabilize them, so that when they do go out there, they have a better chance.

Constance voiced similar sentiments, stating, "Currently the criminal justice system focuses on punishment. After our clients have been locked up and released, what has changed? Nothing." Likewise, Constance stated, "Everyday there [are] people being released with \$200 in their pocket. What is that going to do? If you're putting people in prison to serve their time, then be ready for them when they come out." Similarly, Nancy explained that she was "very ignorant" when she first started her internship. She believed that, "they [the residents] deserve whatever comes their way. They deserve whatever they get." Now she realized how little money the women had for basic necessities, which she identified as "a real challenge." She stated:

When I first came, one of the residents joked to me, 'You have so many pairs of jeans. I'm going to follow you home and I'm going to take some of your jeans.'

And I said to her very ignorantly, 'Why don't you have any jeans?' And then I realized (from supervision) that she just got out of prison and they only give you something to wear outside and that's it. They have nothing when they come out of prison. I know they are given a little bit of money but I know how quickly money goes. Where do they get their socks, their underwear, their kotex, their shampoo? Where do they get the money for that? We take a lot of this stuff for granted. We have a house full of stuff. We have clothes. We have shoes. We have purses. They don't they have nothing.

While the interns discussed ways in which incarceration did not prepare women to reenter society, and recognized the role of poverty, lack of education and victimization in encouraging criminality, they did not suggest alternatives to incarceration or ways to reform society. Instead, they advocated the provision of more treatment programs and greater preparation for reentry through the provision of IDs and referrals as ways to ease former female prisoners' reentry process. In advocating more treatment for the women prisoners, they tied success on parole to the reforming of "selves" during incarceration. This is not surprising, given the emphasis on therapeutic intervention prevalent in welfare and penal systems (Haney 2010; Garland 2001). Interns' focus on rehabilitation programs obscures the social obstacles and inequities the residents at SECOND CHANCES faced prior to, and after, their incarceration. Reentering society with an identification card and referrals will do very little to ameliorate the poverty that led women to SECOND CHANCES in the first place.

Given the inadequacy of reentry programs, Denise, Yvonne, and Constance felt that parole agents should assist women during the transition into their communities, but that most are apathetic.<sup>91</sup> Denise stated:

They're not getting as much help as I thought they were getting. I think the parole department needs to do a little more. A lot of parole agents just kind [of] leave them here, and they don't care anymore. They're like, 'As long as you don't go nowhere, I'm fine.' They only want to come in when there's something wrong, but not praise them when something is done right, like if they complete school or whatever. So you don't see many parole officers, actually you don't see any, coming to SECOND CHANCES.

Interviewer: What kind of help did you think they would be getting?

Denise: I thought they would get some job training and more with (drug) recovery; just overall reentry education. It's like (parolees) are not being able to go into society.

Like Denise, Yvonne felt that parole officers didn't understand or care about women on parole and that the lack of attention to their challenges was related to recidivism. She stated, "Many times they don't offer the services that the client needs. They just say, 'oh you reported. Okay, good luck.' They don't sit there and talk to them and assess them and see what their needs are so that they are able to start their new life. You know a lot of times I think they are setting them up for failure."

Denise, Yvonne and Constance also felt that parole officers did not understand the role of mental illness in former prisoners' lives.<sup>92</sup> Constance believed that the personnel at the Department of Corrections, "failed to consider that these women could be

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<sup>91</sup> Parole agents were described similarly in interviews with residents, as discussed in chapter 4.

<sup>92</sup> Recall that Melinda discussed mental illness during supervision.

depressed, and that their mental illnesses could hinder their abilities to recover and successfully reintegrate into the community.” She wished that parole officers, “paid more attention to the women’s needs.” Likewise, Yvonne believed mental illness was, “one of the pieces in the puzzle that prevents them from adjusting back into society,” but she didn’t think parole officers understood the way in which mental illness could affect parolees’ behavior. She stated, “Parole agents understand mental illness to a certain extent. I think to them it’s written on a paper that (the parolee) was diagnosed with depression, but they don’t understand the effect it has on the women.” Yvonne thought reentry was especially difficult for women with mental illness who had to readjust to being in society after long prison terms. She asserted:

It is not only coming out of prison and having the shock of, ‘Okay, what do I do now?’ But also, ‘how do I deal with my mental illness while I’m out here?’ So I think one of the main obstacles is the lack of attention that (parole agents) give to women with mental illness, because when they are assigned to a parole agent, they are one out of a hundred to a hundred and fifty cases. They don’t have one-on-one interaction to get the resources that they do need in order to start the process of getting their life back together. And they expect them to get their life back together instantly. That’s not going to happen, especially for someone with a mental illness that’s been incarcerated for double-digits [decades]. It’s not going to happen.

Yvonne said she had witnessed how difficult it was for residents with mental illness to transition into society without proper treatment. She referred to a resident who had lived at SECOND CHANCES for two years, but still couldn’t “Go down to the corner supermarket because she is scared and paranoid. She will always isolate herself. She sits in the back and hardly ever goes out of the house. She really can’t function after

two years here. How do they expect her to go out and get a job and be a productive citizen in society?”

Denise was also dissatisfied with the treatment available for mentally ill parolees. Although the Department of Corrections provided “treatment” to women on parole, she felt the doctors did little more than prescribe “a bunch of drugs.” She recalled:

We have one lady here and she has health issues and she went to the parolee outpatient service and the doctors just came out (into the waiting room) and asked, “Anybody need meds?” The parolee says, “me,” and they say, “okay, come on back.” This doctor didn’t take time to sit down and find out what was going on with the parolees or anything; he just held them there long enough to give them meds. That’s not helping, you know? And this woman, she’s taking the meds and it’s not helping her at all.<sup>93</sup>

While the interns felt that the parole agents were apathetic, they felt that employers actively discriminated against parolees. Nancy referred to a criminal record as a “handicap” and remembers hearing an employer tell one of the residents that they did not hire parolees. Constance stated that, “Once they are stamped with the ‘mark of a criminal,’ they are forever stigmatized. This makes it difficult for them to even acquire jobs because many employers are apprehensive about hiring an ‘ex-con’ or the organization simply runs background checks and the parolees cannot get any further in the application process.” Constance remembered working with one resident who spent fifteen minutes on an automated phone interview. When asked if she had ever been

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<sup>93</sup>Another resident, Janet, started having regular seizures that required hospitalization. A doctor at the mental health department found that the seizures were related to drugs she’d been prescribed by a doctor at parolee outpatient services.

convicted of a crime, the resident responded in the affirmative, and the interview promptly ended.

Cheryl thought she could help Susan overcome the stigma of a criminal conviction if she could meet employers, so she encouraged her to apply in person.<sup>94</sup> However, by the end of the day, Cheryl felt discouraged and advised Susan to quit filling out an application for Albertsons. She recalled how long it took to apply for each position:

These applications are long because they ask specific things about your criminal offense, like the Albertson's one. Oh my God, they wanted her parole agent's phone number and all these specific details. I was like, 'Don't even answer the next question, this is ridiculous. They are just going to say no to you.' It got so specific, it was basically like they were trying to get her to quit filling out the application.

Likewise, Yvonne believed that getting a job was one of the most significant challenges residents faced. She stated:

In our economy, jobs are scarce. There are people with degrees and no criminal backgrounds that don't have a job. So for the (parole) system to have expectations that the women can go and get a job when they have a criminal history, is unrealistic. (A criminal conviction) makes it so much harder. I think that their expectations are really, really high. Parole agents really don't understand what's going on.

Yvonne had helped residents fill out job applications online because they lacked computer skills. She recalled how discouraged residents seemed when they were asked if they had been convicted of a crime. She stated:

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<sup>94</sup> One resident believed that she could get a job if she had the chance to meet with the employer. She felt her personality could win anyone over. After she left SECOND CHANCES, she planned to get a job working at the mall, but was unable to. She became an exotic dancer as a last option.

One of the questions they ask is 'Do you have criminal history?' That is discouraging to the women. I've noticed that when they come across that question, they don't freak out, but they kind of pause and they ask, 'What do I answer?' Or they minimize what they did or why they were incarcerated because of fears. They know that their chances of getting that job are slim-to-none because of that question.

According to Cheryl, residents were also ostracized by community members because of their criminal background. She stated:

Just being accepted into society is hard. For example we go to the doctor with Jill and the doctor looks to me and talks to me instead of talking to Jill, and the secretary talks to me instead of talking to Jill. It's hard to redirect people toward the resident, because I feel like they're walking around with a scarlet letter on their forehead

She remembered taking Jill to get a pair of glasses. Jill left the office to use the restroom, and one of the employees approached Cheryl and asked, "Is it okay if she leaves? Is anything going to happen? She's not going to run away to steal anything, is she?" She felt that they watched Jill closely when she walked around the office to try on glasses, but when Cheryl tried them on, no one watched her. Cheryl also recalled an instance when Mona was stigmatized for being on parole. She recalled talking with Mona one day after she returned from drug treatment. After the other group members found out that she lived at SECOND CHANCES, they asked, "Isn't that a house for women who've been in prison?" After her disclosure, she felt that they treated her worse than beforehand, and she reported feelings of shame.

Thus, while the interns were initially resistant to the way the women were portrayed during supervision, by the end of their internship, they asserted that factors

beyond their clients' control impeded their ability to reintegrate into society. During the interviews, they asserted that learning from Melinda and Helen and working with the residents had changed their views about parolees. As in Britton's (2003) study, their assumptions changed as a consequence of their direct interaction with the residents. Although they no longer considered the women to be "violent criminals" or irresponsible manipulators, and although they identified societal factors related to their criminality, they still believed that the women needed to be reformed in order to successfully reintegrate, which I discuss in the next section.

### **A Hierarchy of "Humans?"**

In Britton's (2003) study, the correctional guards thought of the inmates as "human" but not as "equals." Likewise, in my study, the interns portrayed the residents as victims of an unequal society, but they did not think of the women as their equals. This was indicated during interviews in which the interns defended the rules of the house and, in some cases, argued for more rigid rules. The interns thought the rules would instill personal responsibility among a population that had never learned to be responsible in the first place. This is similar to McCorkel's (2003) study of a prison rehabilitation program in which rules and guidelines were defended because the inmates had been improperly socialized as children and thus lacked "structure" in their lives. This also resembles Melinda's tendency to infantilize the residents and it justifies the authority that the staff wield over the residents. Moreover, while the interns denigrated parole agents for controlling rather than assisting parolees, they failed to see how the rules at SECOND



CHANCES also curtailed the residents' freedom to make choices regarding their daily activities and long term goals.

One of the reasons the interns supported the house rules was because they thought the rules taught the residents skills that would help them after they left SECOND CHANCES. The rules were necessary because the residents had presumably never learned to be responsible, thus the interns infantilized the residents as Melinda did during supervision. By infantilizing the residents, they were able to avoid blaming them for being irresponsible in the past and they justified the mechanisms of social control used at SECOND CHANCES. With regard to the requirement that residents provide detailed itineraries when leaving the premises, Denise stated:

I think that itineraries are important because it's a way of following direction. I think that it's good for them because what if they go to a job and the job is working on the streets, but they want you to sign in at a certain time. If you can't learn to do that at home, how you gonna know to do that on the job? Or if you want to go out on vacation, you got to put in the paperwork. If you don't put the paperwork in, and then you go on vacation, you pretty much get fired because they don't know you're on vacation. So, I think that the itineraries just kind of help them with their lives.

Nancy shared similar sentiments when she explained:

I think because of where they've been, and what their past has been like, they should have to face some restrictions. I think it's good for them. (The residents) still have to watch it until they show you that they've learned how to handle their lives and learned how to be around other people. Most of the rules are a matter of consideration. It's common courtesy to call and say, 'Hey, I know you were expecting me at four but I'm probably going to be about 4:15.' These are good habits for them to learn about being responsible.

Thus a contradictory view of residents emerged during my interviews with the interns. The interns identified a variety of barriers the residents experienced during reentry, but they still felt that the women's "selves" needed to be reformed. They thus advocated for both the reformation of society and reformation of the self. Constance illustrated this well. She stated:

These women have been surrounded by others who have abused them or taken advantage of them for as long as they have known. In addition to being abused through domestic partnerships, they were abused by the justice system, which focuses on punishment.

Yet when asked about the rules at SECOND CHANCES, she stated:

I think that the itinerary and call-ins are necessary. The women are still in transition into the community. Eliminating the itineraries and call-ins may lead the clients to believe that they are free to stay out for days at a time. SECOND CHANCES wishes to see that the residents recover successfully, but there is only so much that they can do to help the process. Ultimately, it is up to their own self-determination.

In the interview, Constance implied that the women had been treated unjustly in society, but she also suggested that the residents would make bad choices, if not for the rules. Further, the residents needed "self-determination." Thus she emphasized shortcomings within society and within residents that led toward criminality. In addition the interns suggested that SECOND CHANCES should hire a full time counselor *and* a community liaison that would help the residents build resumes, develop job skills, and work with employers in the community, if additional funding became available.

## **Conclusion**

When I began this study, the social workers and social work interns at SECOND CHANCES were guided by different folk theories. Although the interns initially thought of the residents as “violent criminals” or as manipulators who had made bad choices and thus deserved punishment, their folk theories changed over the course of the internship. Their interaction with their supervisors and the residents shifted their perspective of former women prisoners so that, by the end of the internship, they recognized both structural and individual-level explanations for the behavior and experiences of their clients.

Most prior studies have attributed similar shifts in service providers’ views of their clients to changes in state policy, thereby focusing on changes at the macro-level that affect the daily operations of an agency (McCorkel 2004). Other studies suggest that service providers’ “folk theories” about their clients vary even within the same organization, and shape how they interact with them, but do not investigate if, when, or how these assumptions change (Horowitz 1996). As discussed in Chapter 3, the findings in this study underscore the importance of considering the way in which state policy is implemented at the ground level. Likewise, the findings in this chapter suggest that service providers’ folk theories are dynamic and shaped in relationship with others. This may be particularly true for service providers that are still in training or who work with supervisors willing to challenge their initial folk theories. In this study, the rules required by the Department of Corrections and the interns’ folk theories guided what they were able and willing to do with their clients. Over time, interns’ direct observations of former

female prisoners' reentry process and their interaction with supervisors guided by feminist principles, helped them to recognize that childhood deficits and lack of opportunity created challenges for re-entry. Nevertheless, consistent with the dominant policy discourse on crime, they continued to uphold a largely individualistic and moralistic view of crime and a faith that personal rehabilitation would help the women to avoid future crime and obtain employment.

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **RETHINKING WOMEN'S REENTRY PROCESS: PROGRAM AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

In this dissertation, I have discussed my observations and interactions with women on parole as well as the staff and interns who work at a halfway house for female parolees. Given the dearth of research on halfway houses, as well as women on parole, this study provides an important first look into the lives of women who are unable to rely on family support as they reintegrate into society. Instead, Second Chances, a non-profit agency for women on parole, supported with funds from the Department of Corrections, helps them to meet their basic needs for food and shelter, to obtain cash assistance and supportive services, to identify employment and educational opportunities, and provides them with encouragement during the difficult process of re-entry. I begin this chapter by summarizing my primary findings. After I discuss the patterns that emerged, I link them to existing literature and I highlight the important contributions of this dissertation. I conclude by suggesting areas for future research.

#### **Overview of the Research**

Prior to this study, halfway houses were presumed to benefit offenders as they transitioned out of prison into society, thereby reducing recidivism rates and increasing community safety; yet research on transitional living facilities was lacking. Additionally, researchers had not considered the perspective of the parolees who live there or the

perspectives of those working at these facilities.<sup>95</sup> In this dissertation, I begin to address this gap in the literature by combining information from ethnographic observations of a halfway house with interviews of women who reside there and the lead staff and interns that assisted them. In Chapter Three, I highlighted the implementation of house rules and regulations, which were driven by the funding source. I argued that the mission of the house, which was to help women access resources and develop skills necessary for success, was not met because the Department of Corrections prioritized surveillance over assistance. I found that SECOND CHANCES exerts significant social control over the residents which impedes their ability to reintegrate into the free world because it hampers family reunification and because it “outs” them to members of the community and potential employers. Moreover, those who had the most difficulty reconnecting with family due to the regulations for family visits were the poorest women; thus the house rules intensified disadvantage for the most marginalized residents.

Although the goals at SECOND CHANCES were curtailed by the rules, Melinda, the director, resisted punitive responses to rule infractions by encouraging staff and residents to handle issues “in- house.” Nevertheless, she did try to control their behaviors. One way she did this was by evoking fears associated with being labeled “bad” mothers and “bad” women. Thus, she tried to manage residents’ behavior by reminding them of gender-normative expectations and she justified her intervention into their lives by portraying them as children in need of guidance.

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<sup>95</sup> O’Brien interviewed six women who lived at a halfway house, but they were completing prison terms at the facility, which was a privilege. In contrast, the women in my study were “free” in that they had already been released from prison and lived at the house because of a lack of privilege.

Nevertheless, during interviews, residents identified several benefits to living at the house. My respondents were grateful to have a roof over their heads, three meals a day, and someone to ask about their well-being and daily activities. Women who reported feelings of gratitude tended to be the most disadvantaged residents who had long histories of substance abuse, domestic violence, and had previously been homeless. These women were not as concerned as other residents with having their behavior monitored in order to have their basic needs met in a safe environment.

Chapter Four builds on this by discussing the paths residents took to arrive at SECOND CHANCES after leaving prison. As a consequence of inadequate or nonexistent pre-release programs in prison, the women in this study felt unprepared to exit the prison gates. Some former drug addicts relapsed because they had nowhere to stay on the day of release. Those who had a place to stay immediately following prison had steady work in their past and did not struggle with addiction. Nevertheless, although they had stronger family ties than other residents, their housing arrangements were only temporary since parole terms required them to return to the county where their crime was committed. Taken together, my respondents' experiences immediately following prison suggest that residing at SECOND CHANCES was a strategy for survival given the limited resources available to them. Unfortunately, because of heightened surveillance, it was a strategy that put them at a greater risk of official sanction than parolees who could stay with family or friends.

In Chapter Four, I also discuss the residents' perception of their parole agents, especially with regard to assistance immediately following prison. I found that half of my respondents described their agents as apathetic, while the other half thought that their agents were helpful and encouraging. Agents who were considered to be apathetic failed to provide tangible forms of assistance such as bus tokens or information on community resources. For the most part, agents who were characterized as "sensitive to one's needs" provided words of encouragement, verbal praise, and understanding. As Chapter Three revealed, former prisoners valued the emotional support that peers and staff provided at Second Chances. Likewise, Chapter Four showed that my informants considered parole agents to be "doing their jobs" when they verbally expressed their support for them, even if they did not provide tangible or material support. The perception of a parole agent as apathetic or as encouraging was related to my respondents' expectations of what an agent's role should be and whether or not they had been treated poorly in the past. Regardless of the circumstances that preceded their arrival at SECOND CHANCES, my respondents uniformly argued that parolees need employment and housing assistance in order to be successful on parole.

In Chapter Five, I shifted from investigating the residents' perceptions of the house, the staff, and their parole agents, to investigating the interns' assumptions about the residents and their barriers to reentry. Whereas prior research focuses on discursive shifts and state policy, this chapter suggests that caseworker assumptions are dynamic and related to micro interactions. When they began their internship at SECOND CHANCES, interns thought of the residents as dangerous criminals and they thought the



women merely needed to make better behavioral choices in order to avoid returning to prison. As a consequence of the lessons they learned from the house director and intern supervisor, and because they witnessed the challenges their clients faced, their assumptions changed. By the end of the internship, they identified a number of challenges that impeded their client's ability to successfully transition into society including a lack of pre-release planning, unhelpful parole agents, poverty, lack of employment opportunities, difficulty in obtaining treatment for mental illness, and the stigma and discrimination associated with a criminal record. Although they felt the women lacked access to societal resources, which influenced their path to prison, they still defended the house rules, because they believed that they taught responsibility to those who had never learned to be responsible because they weren't properly socialized as children. The interns thus advocated for both reformation of the self and reformation of society in order to reduce women's recidivism.

### **Contribution to Research on Female Offenders**

Although research on female offenders has grown over the last couple of decades, most studies have focused on the pathways that lead women to prison and their experiences once incarcerated. These studies suggest that women are more disadvantaged than their male counterparts with regard to income, housing, health, mental illness, and familial support (Bloom 2003). At the same time, many female inmates have longer histories of substance abuse and less education than male inmates, which suggests that it may be more difficult for them to face the challenges associated with reentry. While

several scholars have quantitatively investigated women on parole (Schram et al. 2006; LaVigne and Kachnowski 2005), only a handful have qualitatively approached the study of women as they exit from prison gates. Additionally, with the exception of Opsal (2008), who asked women how being on parole affected them, prior studies have not investigated institutions designed to assist women during reentry. Moreover, qualitative and quantitative work on halfway houses for both male and female parolees was lacking.

In this dissertation, I build on the qualitative work of O'Brien (2001), Richie (2001), Dodge and Pogrebin (2001), and Opsal (2008) by interviewing former female prisoners. These studies utilized interview data to discuss how women experience reentry and the challenges that they face, but these researchers did not investigate the role of supportive services. I move beyond interview data to include ethnographic observations of women parolees at a halfway house as well as the staff and interns who work with them. Thus, this study contributes to the literature on female offenders and reentry and serves as a starting point for research on facilities designed to assist ex-offenders during the period following their release from prison.

Similar to existing research on female offenders, the majority of the women in my study had personal histories of abuse, they had not graduated high school, and they lacked job skills and steady employment histories. My respondents reported feeling ill-prepared to return to society and felt that prison did little to prepare them to find housing and support themselves upon release. According to observations of and interviews with residents and interns, they faced difficulty in securing housing, employment, and

treatment for mental illness. Most of the women at SECOND CHANCES had long histories of substance abuse and struggled to face the difficulties of reentry while maintaining sobriety.

These findings confirm past research on women during reentry, with one exception. While most existing research on female offenders suggests that maintaining their relationship with their children is a central concern during and after incarceration, my informants were not custodial mothers. This finding underscores the importance of funding programs for female parolees that are not predicated on their role as mothers. For example, although my respondents were not responsible for the care of others, they still had difficulty meeting their basic needs following incarceration. Other scholars have found that men have greater levels of familial support than female inmates, higher income levels prior to incarceration, and fewer rates of mental illness and substance abuse (LaVigne and Kachnowski 2005; Bloom 2003). Most of the women in this study had weak-to-nonexistent ties with family; most had been abused and had used illicit substances to numb the pain, or to cope with mental illness. Taken together, these findings support the pathways perspective which claims that the reentry process differs across gender. Because men's and women's experiences of reentry differ, practitioners and parole officers should receive gender-responsive training so as to better meet the needs of both male and female offenders.

Although the pathways to offending influence parolees after release, the reentry process presents new obstacles (Pager 2003; Brown and Bloom 2009:320; Petersilia

2003). Consistent with Opsal's (2008) research, the terms of parole hindered my respondents' ability to successfully reintegrate. Some of the women in my study were unable to meet the basic need of housing because they were prohibited from leaving the county where their offense was committed. The terms of parole and the rules of the house affected residents' ability to reconnect with family, even though existing research emphasizes the importance of familial support during reentry (Visher and Travis 2003). My study also suggests that the residents experienced discrimination in the job market and ostracized by members of the community because of the stigma associated with their criminal backgrounds. Residents felt that the house rules, mandated by the Department of Corrections, increased their odds of experiencing discrimination since monitoring procedures disclosed their criminal status to others. Thus, structures put in place to monitor *and* assist parolees appear to hinder reentry through an emphasis on surveillance, consistent with the tenets of the "new penology" (Feeley and Simon 1992).

According to Feeley and Simon (1992), the "new penology" represents a shift within the criminal justice system from "rehabilitating" offenders to managing and monitoring them. Parole officers are posited to rely on risk management tools rather than seeking to address the needs of the parolees on their caseloads. Given that the daily operations of the halfway house focus on monitoring the behavior of residents, the "new penology" reaches beyond the criminal justice system into private, non-profit organizations. The house's feminist mission of empowering the residents thus could not be accomplished because of the rules and regulations required by their main source of funds, the Department of Corrections. The folk theory that guided the director and intern

supervisor, which constructed residents as victims in need of support rather than as perpetrators, is clearly at odds with the “new penology.” Additionally, some respondents felt that their parole agents had been responsive to their needs, by showing them emotional support. Thus, both staff at SECOND CHANCES and parole agents appear to resemble “counselors,” at least with regard to providing former women prisoners with emotional warmth, rather than merely serving as “law enforcement officers.” This finding is at odds with Opsal’s (2008:198) research. The majority of the women in her study “were generally aware that their parole officers were not in their lives to make the reentry process easier or even treat them as unique individuals, but...to enforce the rules associated with parole.” However, my study suggests that there has not been a holistic shift to the new penology, and that how agents interpret their role and relate to their parolees varies across agents, providing more or less material and emotional support for them.

While parole officers exercise discretion in their interactions with parolees, the decisions parole officers make are influenced by institutional policies (Opsal 2008). It is therefore important to consider state policies, programs and organizations, and individual-level responses to parolees. Thus, I investigated the implementation of the rules as well as the assumptions that guided caseworker-client interactions. While most recent research suggests that state-funded penal institutions have shifted from an emphasis on reformation of society to reformation of the self (Haney 20004; Haney 2010; McCorkel 2006), this study finds that social workers and interns at SECOND CHANCES identify a number of structural factors that encouraged their client’s criminality.

Moreover, existing literature presents service providers' folk theories as static or influenced by policy changes; in my study, the interns' assumptions changed over the course of their year-long internship as a consequence of their interactions with parolees and their internship coordinator, who was guided by a structural and feminist approach to understanding female criminality. My research thus shows that service providers' folk theories about their clients can change through micro-level (interpersonal) and meso-level (or organizational) processes in addition to policy changes and dominant discourses guiding such changes at the macro level.

### **Directions for the Future**

Scholars have touted halfway houses as a possible solution to the difficulties offenders face as they reenter society (Travis 2005; Petersilia 2003). Given that research on halfway houses is lacking, we should be cautious in portraying them as the ideal solution for alleviating the obstacles parolees face. While SECOND CHANCES does offer free room and board to women on parole, it fails to offer additional forms of tangible assistance. While the Department of Corrections professes to fund halfway houses that provide a range of services, in actuality, the funding afforded to these agencies is insufficient for offering holistic reentry services. Moreover, the Department of Corrections required SECOND CHANCES to engage in considerable surveillance and monitoring of residents, which some residents viewed as counterproductive to social reintegration since it disclosed their criminal background to teachers, employers, and other community members, and created tensions between the staff and residents of this

halfway house. These findings underscores the importance of investigating the actual operations of agencies and their resources at the ground level before assessing its function and whether or not it is successful in meeting the needs of parolees and reducing the recidivism rate.

This is the first qualitative study that investigated the role of a halfway house during reentry. It is therefore a decidedly exploratory study. We need to know more about how to structure these facilities and how they assist or hinder former offenders. For example, some of my respondents felt that a rule-bound environment enhanced their efforts to remain sober and to avoid law-violating behavior; yet other residents left SECOND CHANCES because they did not feel that their needs were being met. How can we tailor a program so that it benefits most of its recipients? Existing pre-release and reentry programs need to be rigorously evaluated so that they can better meet the needs of those who experience them. Moreover, developing effective pre-release programs should be a priority, not only because they benefit the parolee, but because they will likely reduce crime rates in communities with high numbers of returning prisoners. For example, the women in my study asserted that a lack of housing and employment is a common trajectory back to prison. Women should have a safe and stable place to live as they exit prison gates as well transportation to get there, which prison pre-release counselors could secure. With regard to employment, parole agents could play a more supportive role during reentry by providing information on job fairs, job skills training, and employers in the community. Unfortunately, only one of my respondents reported having a parole agent who provided this type of assistance.

Future endeavors should investigate the role and impact of halfway houses for men on parole. The findings of this study are related to social workers' assumptions, which were based on their belief that clients experienced gender disadvantage. Ultimately, their folk theories guided their interactions with clients and the lessons that they taught to the interns. Given that gender patterns social interactions, it is important to investigate the experiences of men who reside in similar institutions as well as the caseworkers who assist them in order to elucidate the role of gendered expectations and assumptions on men's reentry process.

This study highlights the importance of examining the intersection of gender, class, and race. The residents of SECOND CHANCES were among the most disadvantaged parolees and they were primarily African-American and Latina. Because of their precarious living situations, most would not have been included in the qualitative studies of former female prisoners. Yet parolees with instable housing are more likely to violate the terms of their parole, thus it is important to center the voices of women who struggle to survive.

The importance of having a stable place to live following release should not be understated. The primary benefit of SECOND CHANCES is that women can live for a period of one year without worrying about their rent. However, while this may seem like a significant period of time, for a woman with a long history of substance abuse, mental illness, lack of familial support, and few skills, spending a year in a transitional housing facility that does not offer additional assistance is likely to delay the inevitable. Many of



these women will leave SECOND CHANCES without the employment skills, education and training, or the job opportunities necessary to avoid “the iron cage” (Britton 2003). As one resident explained to me, “We will do what we have to do, even if in surviving, we are dying.” As a society, if we want to reduce the financial and human costs associated with incarceration, we must do more to support women both before and after they leave prison.

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**APPENDIX A: DEMOGRAPHIC DATA FOR PARTICIPANTS**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Intern or Resident</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race or Ethnicity</b>
Roberta	Resident	48	African-American
Jennifer	Resident	48	Pacific Islander
Erica	Resident	41	Hispanic
Janet	Resident	53	Caucasian
Felicia	Resident	38	African-American
Mary	Resident	47	Caucasian
Bernice	Resident	50	African-American
Julie	Resident	47	Caucasian
Susan	Resident	35	Hispanic and Caucasian
Denise	Intern	44	African-American
Constance	Intern	25	Asian-American
Nancy	Intern	55	Caucasian
Yvonne	Intern	26	Hispanic
Cheryl	Intern	22	Iranian-American

## **APPENDIX B: INTERN INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**

Background info: Age, racial-ethnic identity, educational background, career aspirations?

1. How would you describe HH residents?
2. Has working with parolees changed any of your viewpoints regarding parole? In what way?
3. Do you feel you've been able to assist parolees? If so, in what way?
4. What are some of the challenges you have witnessed parolees face?
5. Are there any constraints you face in the kind of assistance you can provide for parolees and if so, what are they? (such as budget constraints, constraints based on rules, lack of time, lack of training, etc.)
6. What do you think would help parolees successfully transition into the community?
7. In what ways do you think the halfway house helps parolees? Do you think there are ways in which the house negatively impacts parolees?
8. Is there anything about working with this population that you liked/disliked? Is there anything that surprised you?
9. When you graduate with your MSW, would you consider working with parolees? Why or why not?
10. Is there anything else they would like to add that you haven't already covered at the end of the interview?

## **APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR RESIDENTS**

### Parolee Background

How long were you incarcerated?

What were you incarcerated for?

Had you been incarcerated before?

What factors influenced your path to prison?

### Incarceration Experience

Did you participate in any programs such as skills training while in prison? If so, which ones?

Which did you think were helpful? Which did not help?

What would you change about your prison experience?

Do you feel like your experience in prison was beneficial?

What were your experiences preceding and directly following your release from prison?

Were you worried about anything in particular on the day of your release?

### Parole

What are the terms of your parole?

Do you think your parole officer has been sensitive to your needs?

What would you change about the parole process?

What has been the biggest challenge for you since release?

Who has shown you support?

Do you feel comfortable telling people you have been incarcerated?

### Paid Work

How well prepared were you for the job market? Do you think you have experienced discrimination based on your incarceration?

Are you employed? If so, where? How did you acquire this job? How long have you worked there?

Have you had any other jobs since you've been released? If so, why did you leave the position?

Have you had any periods of unemployment?

What is your monthly income? Is your income steady?

Do you worry that you will meet all your financial commitments each month?

Is there anything you pay for that is required due to parole?

Is it difficult to manage employment, motherhood and the terms of your parole? If so, explain.

What are your plans (employment, mothering, relationships in general) going forward?

### Substance Use

Have you ever used illegal substances?

Have you ever used legal substances in excess?

When did you begin using illegal/legal substances?

Has the use of illegal/legal substances ever interfered with your role as a parent? Your performance at work?

Are you concerned about your ability to remain sober?

Have you found a substance abuse program you can access?

What do you like about the program? What do you dislike?

### Mental Health

Do you ever feel sad, alone, angry, depressed or anxious?

Do you have anyone you can talk to about your feelings?

### Mother-child Relationship

How many children do you have & what are their ages?

How would you describe your children?

How old were your children when you were incarcerated?

How old were your children when you were released?

How would you describe your relationship with your children prior to incarceration?

Did incarceration change your relationship with your children?

Did incarceration affect your children?

Did you stay in contact with your children while incarcerated and if so, how?

Who cared for the children while you were away?

Did you have any conflicts with them during this time?

Have you had difficulty reestablishing yourself as their mother? Explain.

Who has helped you parent?

### Relationships

Is there anyone in particular that has helped you during reentry? Is there anyone you feel has hindered you during reentry?

### Halfway House

In what ways has the halfway house assisted you?

What would you change about the halfway house?

Did you come here voluntarily?

Have the staff or interns been helpful? If so, in what ways?



What do you think about the rules at SECOND CHANCES?

Have you ever asked for help and been denied?