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THE TRANSITIONAL JOURNEY FROM INCARCERATION TO A COLLEGE DEGREE THROUGH THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN

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THE TRANSITIONAL JOURNEY FROM INCARCERATION TO A COLLEGE

DEGREE THROUGH THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

THE TRANSITIONAL JOURNEY FROM INCARCERATION TO A COLLEGE

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Marsha Milan-Bethel

This qualitative narrative study shares the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated women, their reintegration into the community, and their journey to and through college. The eight participants span between 25 and 64 years of age, have spent varying lengths of time incarcerated, and are now either in college or recent graduates of both public and private universities. Research indicates that a large majority of incarcerated women come from economically disadvantaged communities, are vocationally unskilled, and have limited access to in-prison postsecondary programs (Western et al., 2015). However, by earning a college credential, women rebuild their sense of self, are better prepared to seek and keep employment, support their families, and become productive members of their communities.

DEDICATION

First, thank you, God, for waking me daily to do the work you have guided me to do. Through you, I have found my purpose: to support, motivate, and inspire future generations to achieve their educational and career aspirations!

To my Dissertation Chair, Dr. Aquino, and my committee members, Dr. DiMartino, Dr. Kotok, and Dr. Parnther, I sincerely appreciate the time and effort you all have invested in nurturing my intellectual curiosity throughout this journey and helping me navigate the intricacies of doctoral research. This process has enriched my academic experience and impacted my personal and professional development. Thank you!

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Women make up a small portion of the prison population, but their incarceration rates have continuously escalated in recent years. The number of incarcerated women in the United States has increased by over 800% since 1985, surpassing the growth rate of men (Seo et al., 2021; Travis et al., 2014). With 1.3 million women (about the population of New Hampshire) in correctional control, the United States continues to imprison women at rates at least double that of our closest international allies (Kajstura, 2019; Sawyer, 2018).

The terms "prison or penitentiary" and "jail" are often used interchangeably and will be throughout this document. However, not all "prisons" are created equal. The critical distinction is that convicted felons are detained following their trial in state or federal prisons/penitentiaries. Jails are considered the entry point into the criminal justice system, with over 730,000 people arrested in over 3,000 jails across the United States (Copp & Bales, 2018). State and federal prisons are funded by their respective budgets, and local jails are funded by tax-supported budgets and local authorities (Copp & Bales, 2018). However, according to the National Research Council (Tavis et al., 2014), all correctional institutions are managed differently. The level of security and conditions of confinement, the number of educational and vocational resources, penal philosophy, and administrative leadership can make one facility fundamentally different from another.

Unfortunately, incarceration and the punitive approach to rehabilitation does not reduce crime or improve public safety (Copp & Bales, 2018). Those who cycle in and out of our nation's jails and prisons are often identified as marginalized individuals who are uneducated, struggle with poverty, have poor health, mental illness, and substance

addiction (Copp & Bales, 2018; Willging et al., 2015; National Resource Center on Justice Involved Women, April 2016). According to Copp and Bales (2018), from 2000 to 2015, the population of women in our nation's jails increased by 15%, with African American women detained at higher rates than other ethnicities. Furthermore, the Prison Policy Initiative (Kajstura, 2019) reports that 60% of incarcerated women have not been convicted of a crime and are awaiting their trial. As a result, even individuals who may be innocent remain detained for months or even years. Inequity of this sort can lead to adverse psychological effects, which can further prevent women from pursuing educational and career opportunities. Therefore, upward mobility for themselves, their families, and their immediate community is hindered.

Female incarceration research is crucial to understanding the causes that contribute to criminalization, the repercussions of mass incarceration, and its long-term ramifications. The Sentencing Project (Nellis & Komar, 2023) advocates for practical approaches to crime to reduce incarceration and adult and juvenile criminalization through advancing racial, ethnic, economic, and gender justice. Addressing racial disparities and injustice is crucial for putting an end to mass incarceration. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, in 2021, there were over a million women under correctional supervision, including 83,349 women confined in state and federal prisons (Carson, 2022), 85,100 women in local jails (Zeng, 2022), and 807,511 women on probation or parole (Kaeble, 2023). These statistics demonstrate the urgency of implementing comprehensive reforms aimed at ending mass incarceration and shifting towards rehabilitation-focused measures.

There is a crucial distinction between someone who is on probation and someone who is on parole. Probation is considered an alternative to incarceration, while women who have served time are usually released under parole (Harding et al., 2022). However, in both situations, individuals are presented with requirements that make it challenging to succeed (Harding et al., 2022). The probation and parole systems often have lengthy supervision periods, onerous limitations, and ongoing oversight riddled with injustices that set people up for failure (Harding et al., 2022). It consequently becomes a means of recycling women into our nation's prisons and jails.

The escalation in incarceration rates for women is a result of policies, ideologies, and law enforcement practices that target primarily African American and Latina women who are poor and uneducated (Scott, 2017; Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017). In addition, 80% of incarcerated women are mothers, with more than half being the primary caregivers of their minor child or children (Kajstura & Sawyer, 2023; Kajstura, 2019; Howard et al., 2017; Kellet & Willing, 2017; Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017). Therefore, the effects of mass incarceration destabilize families and continue to marginalize low-income communities of color.

Poverty, unemployment, and a lack of educational achievement are common problems in municipal jails and state prisons (Copp & Bales, 2018). A more significant majority of the incarcerated have less than a high school education, and local jails supply fewer programs and services than state and federal prisons (Copp & Dales, 2018). Detained women have complained about inequitable treatment and the disparities in educational programs provided in female prisons (Linder, 2018). The Vera Institute (Delaney et al., 2016) indicates that 35% of state prisons reported offering college courses

in 28 states. However, college courses were limited to only 6% of all prisoners (Delaney et al., 2016). In addition to the limited access, most programs were developed with a male-centered approach, leaving women's experiences widely overlooked and unconsidered (Seo et al., 2021).

Formerly incarcerated women are often expected to reintegrate into society as good, law-abiding, and productive citizens. However, the United States prison system does not effectively rehabilitate or educate women, leaving them unprepared for their release (Kellet & Willing, 2011; Tietjen et al., 2018). Their length of incarceration, their level of education, their mental health status, and the effects of their childhood or adult trauma are all factors that can affect an individual's reentry. Without appropriate reintegration support, women who are released are at a considerable risk of recidivating and returning to prison within three years (Alpher & Duros, 2018).

Having a felony conviction can restrict one's efforts to reintegrate successfully. The stigma of having a felony conviction can be demoralizing and discouraging and contributes to additional isolation from society (Arditti, 2005; Gunnison et al., 2015; Willging et al., 2015). During the reentry period, women face many hardships in reestablishing themselves and working on obtaining proper identification, seeking housing, and gaining employment while completing mandated programs and reconnecting with their families (Middlemass, 2017; Mijs, 2016). Enrolling in college may not be an immediate priority; however, attending has many benefits. Engagement on a college campus allows access to a positive network of individuals and support to build on one's human and social capital (Tietjen et al., 2018). Enrollment also fosters the growth of soft skills like the capacity for interpersonal trust and effective communication (Mukamal et

al., 2015), which can positively impact a returning citizen. Another valuable resource is the presence of campus resources, including a dedicated support system (Gunnison et al., 2015; Willging et al., 2015). A reliable and consistent support system can ease the transition during reentry while connecting with others through this adjustment period.

Women are more likely than men to have a high school diploma or its equivalent upon incarceration (Kajstura & Sawyer, 2023), with additional women working on completing a high school equivalency diploma while incarcerated (Soggrins & Mally, 2010). Women impacted by the criminal legal system may struggle with their transition into the community as well as a transition into college as marginalized adult learners. Formerly convicted women are often 25 years of age and older, with 65% being mothers of school-aged children (Kellefet & Willinging, 2011; Snodgrass et al., 2017; Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017). As college students, these women will be less likely to be active campus community members and are at greater risk of dropping or stopping out of their educational pursuits (Kasworm, 2014). In addition, a nontraditional student will likely face academic, psychological, and social disadvantages from the moment they enroll (Kasworm, 2014). Therefore, the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated women transitioning to the community and into college are essential voices to capture for the literature.

Purpose of the Study

This research study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of women's experiences transitioning from incarceration to their community and to and through college. The voices and experiences of women within in-prison college education programs are limited (Hui-Kim et al., 2018). In addition, much less is known about the

achievements of higher education for individuals with conviction histories in the

community (Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017), as college students with criminal

records are a protected, unrepresented, and minoritized student population (McTier et al.,

2017; Pelletier et al., 2019). Therefore, to fill the gap in the literature, this study will use

narrative methodology to capture the "detailed stories" expressed by participants

(Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 71) of their transition experience to and through college and

their community.

Without assistance and support, the journey to a socially integrated and functional

life after incarceration is exceptionally challenging. Social integration entails establishing

a sense of community and material security (Western et al., 2015). To reintegrate

successfully, researchers Scroggins and Mally (2010) highlight five critical areas for a

woman's transition into society post-incarceration. These include childcare and parenting

skills development, healthcare and substance abuse therapy, housing and transportation,

education/career training services, and social support programs (Scroggins & Mally,

2010). Therefore, this narrative study aims to capture the experiences of marginalized

women affected by incarceration and their journey to and through college and their

community.

Theoretical Framework

Women released from prison often lack the adequate support and resources to help

them fulfill their goals of living a crime-free life. Women are at the center of their

ecological system during the reentry period. Many women may feel anxious about their

return, and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994)

emphasizes the analysis of the relationships and social settings that contextualize one's

experience. Through their lived experience, they will understand the potential hazards and resources available to navigate their reentry successfully. This idea emphasizes that proximal interactions within immediate social environments, such as one's family and community, and how the college or university accepts, acclimates, and integrates them will impact the woman's redevelopment (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). New or continuous social ties and their surroundings influence how the newly released woman navigates her reentry process (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994).

According to Nancy Schlossberg's (1989) theory of Marginality and Mattering, experiencing a transition either causes you to feel like you matter or causes you to feel like you are marginalized. This research study will focus on the shared experiences of formerly incarcerated women who have transitioned to their community and into a college environment to assess the areas where they feel valued most. These women may feel marginalized due to the stigma attached to a criminal conviction (Western et al., 2015). Therefore, capturing the details of their personal experiences in colleges, universities, and other areas of the community is salient to this study. Such an analysis is vital to determining how this traditionally underrepresented population feels like they matter in community settings.

Women may feel marginalized upon release since it may take time to feel connected and build trust with others. Furthermore, their emotional and financial state may affect how they address issues in an unfamiliar environment (Guido et al., 2016). The findings can help identify women's critical strategies for finding their place within their community and the college setting as they advance from their marginalized status. In addition, the findings will add to the limited literature on female college students with

conviction histories and provide information for colleges on supporting this marginalized population.

Significance of Study

Given the insurmountable obstacles during reentry, successful reentry is an elusive goal for many (Gunnison et al., 2016). According to reentry research, the ability of formerly incarcerated people to successfully reintegrate is hampered by several obstacles, including inadequate preparation (Willging et al., 2015) and insufficient assistance to connect to resources (Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017). Therefore, the authentic voice and the individual experiences of formerly incarcerated women and their reentry to their communities and colleges are essential to the literature. Personal narratives are a source of knowledge (Conner, 2011; Creswell & Poth, 2018) that will be analyzed to answer each research question.

A personal narrative embraces all aspects of an individual's experience, with each event considered a valuable source of knowledge (Conner, 2011). Therefore, narrative inquiry will be used to understand the actions and experiences of formerly convicted women with aspirations to receive a college education to advance personally and economically. Being uneducated and having the stigma of having been incarcerated adds barriers to employment opportunities (Gunnison et al., 2016; Willging et al., 2015; Simpkins, 2015). Although the reentry transition offers opportunities for growth and development, it is not possible to predict a favorable outcome for every individual, especially for adult women entering college post-incarceration.

Data from the National Center of Education Statistics (2021) suggests that a higher percentage of non-traditional students (above 25) attend part-time. Non-traditional

students comprise 60% of undergraduate students at public 4-year institutions and 63% of undergraduates at 2-year public institutions (National Center of Education Statistics, 2021). This suggests that most transitioning women may enroll part-time as they acclimate to the environment. In addition, by enrolling in college, women can establish substantial community relationships that can assist in developing skills such as effective communication, advocacy, and leadership (John Jay Institute for Justice and Opportunity, 2019).

Earning an associate degree can lead to an increased earning of "22% for females" (Belfield & Bailey, 2011, p. 49). In addition, despite entering the workforce later, those who earn a bachelor's degree, on average, can make over one million dollars more than high school graduates (Bowers & Bergman, 2016). Further added positive associations of degree attainment include increased healthier behaviors and lower rates of criminal activity for those in low-income communities (Belfield & Baily, 2011). Also, women who earn a college degree and find work with medical insurance are better able to care for their children in the long run. These positive associations can also aid in reestablishing healthy familial bonds typically affected by incarceration.

Connection with Social Justice and Vincentian Mission in Education

The goal of this research study is to evaluate and share the lived experiences of women who transitioned to the community after their incarceration. The secondary purpose is to learn about their college experience after a period of imprisonment. Women with conviction histories may not have economic, physical, and social advantages while reentering society after release and need support. As a result, this dissertation study

coincides with St. John's University's Vincentian Mission in education by sharing each participant's individual experience.

Research Questions

The research on women and incarceration is vast. However, with the increasing number of women involved with the criminal justice system, more than 75% recidivating within nine years of release, it is clear criminal justice reforms need restructuring (Sawyer, 2018; Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2021; Snodgrass et, al. 2017; Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017). The following research questions are essential in identifying strategies and opportunities for this population:

RQ1: What are the experiences of women transitioning into society after incarceration, including participation in post-secondary education?

RQ2: How do women engage and interact with support within their surrounding community, including the college environment?

RQ3: How do women identify success post-incarceration?

Definition of Terms

To assist with clarification, the researcher will use the following definitions in the proposed study:

Felony conviction

It is a socially constructed lived experience that extends one's past into the future.

Human capital

Assets include education, training, intelligence, skills, health, and other characteristics employers value, such as loyalty and punctuality.

Mattering

"The beliefs people have, whether right or wrong... that they are the object of someone else's attention, and that others care about them and appreciate them" (Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering, 1989, p. 21).

Reentry

The process of reintegration from incarceration to society.

Social capital

The value generated from positive interpersonal relationships, networks, and social connections (Tietjen G. et al., 2018).

Systemic barriers

Challenges and roadblocks related to conviction history include obtaining stable housing and employment and formal and informal sanctions/policies.

Women in transition/Women with lived experience/Transitioning citizens

Participants in this study with criminal justice involvement are referred to as women in transition to resist objectification and stigma.

Conclusion

This chapter introduced the study's topic, purpose, significance, and research questions. This study will utilize a personal narrative method to share the unique experiences of formerly incarcerated women and their transition to their community and through college. The following chapter will introduce the theoretical frameworks to be utilized. It will also provide a literature review that includes the history of educational initiatives, including the Second Chance Pell Grant program, the unmet needs of

transitioning women, and difficulties faced by college students with criminal conviction

histories.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The reentry process is a personal experience limited to those serving jail and prison time (Howard et al., 2017; Rowell-Cunsolo et al., 2016). The reentry period begins once an individual's time is served and they are released to return to their community. However, returning home after a period of incarceration entails more than only re-entering the lives of families, friends, and others within your community. For the individual, it typically presents significant challenges, including conditions of release and mandatory meetings with probation or parole officers (Chamberlain, 2016). Transitioning citizens struggle to establish their place in society while coping with social pressure and economic hardship (Western et al., 2015). Most deal with strained relationships, lack of education and poor work histories, finding suitable housing, and an evolving technological world.

Theoretical Frameworks

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Framework

This study was guided by Bronfenbrenner's (1977) Ecological Systems Framework (ESF), which defines development as the scientific study of dynamic interrelationships between a changing individual and the changing environmental setting in which they live. It is one of the most widely known theoretical frameworks in various disciplines and social science fields (Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017). The ESF places individuals in a nested system where they are at the center of their development. The ESF (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) explains how environmental factors affect individual development. The individual's community and how they interact within their community play a crucial role in shaping an individual's mindset and interactions within these nested systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Transitioning women may often return from prison into the same nested systems that

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influenced their criminal behavior. As a result of their newfound independence, the transitioning woman must adjust how she interacts with her community so she can change her mindset and refrain from engaging in further unlawful offenses.

Bronfenbrenner (1977) views environments as intrinsically connected to the individual within them. The ESF's five nested systems (environments) include microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, macrosystems, and chronosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Ozaki et al., 2020; Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017). The framework uses concentric circles to position the individuals at the center, with microsystems circling the self and chronosystems at the outermost circle (Ozaki et al., 2020). With the self at the center, the individual's development is seen as continuous, with the individual entering and exiting through each system concurrently. The theory explores individuals' interaction and proximal relationships with various environmental systems as contributing to a particular outcome (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

The microsystem is "an immediate setting" with complex relations within primary familial relationships. In this area, the woman engages in roles such as parent, daughter, and sibling, as well as participant and student (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Arditti, 2007; Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017). Since 65% of incarcerated women are mothers to school-aged children, they are more family and children-centered, seeing themselves in these roles of mothers and wives/partners (Tiejten et al., 2018). This area is seen as a primary development area with the most proximal settings.

The mesosystem is considered a collection of microsystems (Ozaki et al., 2020; Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017). In this sphere, the individual actively takes part and interacts face-to-face with others in significant settings such as schools, peer groups, churches, and

other social settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017). This area is formed or widened each time the individual enters a new setting. It can also be diminished when the individual removes themselves from a particular setting. The connection between the home and the context engaging the developing person, such as a college setting, will be investigated for this study.

Extending beyond the mesosystem is the exosystem, which embraces other contexts and additional community factors to influence one's developmental possibilities. In this sphere, the transitioning woman is not directly involved but can be affected. An example of this would be policy change or the lack of funding to support programming (Farineau, 2016). As a result, any changes in policy or funding might indirectly impact a formerly incarcerated woman's participation in supportive programs within a college or community setting.

The macrosystem, which relates to the greater society's widely held beliefs and cultural milieu, is regarded as the highest of the ecosystems (Farineau, 2016). Transitioning women will often face the stigma of having a criminal conviction history. This stigma may cause women to disconnect and detach from positive networks and reengage in criminal behavior. However, through enriching personal experiences and proximal relationships, women can overcome their stigma and be seen as contributing members of society.

The chronosystem reflects the influence of time through change or consistency for the individual. To investigate chronosystems, researchers consider changes in the individual's lifetime caused by events or experiences (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). These experiences can be normative when they are expected, such as enrolling in college, or

nonnormative when the occurrence is unexpected, such as the death of a loved one (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). These events may change the person's interaction with their surroundings, resulting in a dynamic that could lead to developmental change (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). This is where we can find personal growth, development, and changes in personality and behavior.

The term "proximal processes" describes the result of a person-environment interaction. This term suggests that the development of the individual is an outcome of an individual's interaction with their environments from the microsystem to the chronosystems (Miller et al., 2021). An eco-map allows formerly incarcerated individuals to show their most important relationships with people, groups, organizations, and society (Miller et al., 2021). The greater the value of those interactions over an extended period, the more influential they could be. Recently, researchers have demonstrated how one can apply an ecosystem tool to inform and guide older adults (above 60) during their reentry transition (Miller et al., 2021). It serves as a tool to reveal relationships (both positive and stressful), which helps the individual find nurturing environments that will aid the individual during their reentry transition and identify or avoid negative environments. It has also been used to show problematic relationships that could deter individuals from creating goals that would otherwise lead to a positive and secure environment. These identifications are crucial to a positive reintegration after incarceration.

Researchers Ozaki, Olson, Jonhson-Guerrero, and Pizzolato (2020) use Bronfenbrenner's ESF to demonstrate the importance of academic integration and college microsystems (classroom, instructors, peers) in community colleges. The study clarified the psychological functioning behind the students' persistence, affecting diverse systems.

These include the community college itself, family, and broader communities, in addition to policy and socio-historical events (Ozaki et al., 2020; Rose, 2015).

Ozaki et al. (2020) used the Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems (PVEST) framework to investigate high-risk students' community college experiences. The study focused on participants in a government-sponsored program for marginalized students. Participants were predominantly female, attending either a community college in Southern California or Eastern Michigan. The findings suggest that administrators in community colleges must recognize the importance of the many environment's students move through each day.

Students participating in the study linked family and college within their microsystems (Ozaki et al., 2020). In addition, in the macrosystem, the impacts of welfare policy, financial aid policy, and the labor market were the most common situations linked to significant phenomenological experience (Ozaki et al., 2020). Therefore, the PVEST model helped develop persistence plans and identify what academic integration looks like for female students in a community college setting. This is important since many transitioning women who have earned an equivalency diploma will attend community colleges as marginalized students. New college students must successfully navigate these systems to persist in college.

Schlossberg's Theory of Marginality and Mattering

Institutions of higher education are responsible for creating socially just environments for their communities (Belfield & Bailey, 2011). Institutions do this by offering an inclusive atmosphere where students can advance with their peers and participate in activities and programs outside of the classroom (Tietjen et al., 2018).

Providing social services to their local community demonstrates the university's ethical approach to creating a socially just environment for the marginalized populations who live within them (Belfield & Bailey, 2011).

Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989) developed the Marginality and Mattering theory after evaluating Astin's (1984) involvement theory. Schlossberg was inspired by Astin's (1984) emphasis on student involvement and participation. According to Schlossberg (1989), "Involvement develops links between students, instructors, and staff that allow individuals to believe in their worth" (p. 5). As a concept for shaping the community, she proposed marginality and mattering.

Schlossberg (1989) emphasizes the significance of evaluating the notions of marginality and mattering when examining the impact of the college experience on student development. Marginality and mattering (Schlossberg et al., 1989) sit on a spectrum where the two terms are on opposite axes. Marginality arises when people take on a new role, such as becoming a college student and feeling unsure about it. This feeling leads one to believe they do not matter and to question their belonging and membership. At the opposite end of the spectrum, mattering is the feeling that an individual is a significant contributor and is valued.

There are five aspects of mattering (Schlossberg et al., 1989) that may be considered:

- *Attention* occurs when the individual feels they are noticed.

- *Importance* allows the individual to believe they are cared about.

- *Ego-extensions* occur when the individual feels someone is proud of what they do and accomplish or will sympathize with their failure.

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- *Dependence* reinforces the feeling of being needed.

- *Appreciation* is the feeling that others appreciate one's efforts.

Schlossberg's (1989) theory of marginality and mattering applies to transitioning women currently attending college; however, transitioning women may feel marginal upon their release from incarceration as well. They may question where, how, and to whom they matter and belong. Therefore, it is salient to utilize a narrative methodology to understand their experiences in identifying opportunities for belonging and membership.

Schlossberg (1989) suggests that once college students believe they matter to others, their feelings of marginality decline. Therefore, the role of college administrators and other staff members in helping increase feelings of mattering is vital to the success of these future college students. Tinto (1975) expressed that social support allows college students to become socially integrated and involved in college environments, increasing the likelihood of academic persistence. Support from friends, family, and college staff is the primary link to successfully navigating the transition to college as a justice-involved adult student. Researchers have implemented Schlossberg's (1989) concepts of marginality and matter to emphasize the pivotal role of support from friends, family, and college staff as the primary link to a successful college experience.

Marginality and mattering were implemented by researchers Rayle and Chung (2007) in a phenomenological study of first-year students' perception of mattering. The study investigated anticipated interrelationships at a predominantly Euro-American, southwest four-year public university (Rayle & Chung, 2007). Since the reintegration process is characterized as a "gendered phenomenon," with the post-release experiences of women being notably distinct from those of men, this study provides insight into gender

differences of marginality and mattering in a college setting, with 68% of the participants identifying as female first-year students (Cobbina, 2010, p. 211).

Researchers Rayle and Chung (2007) reported females had higher social support from family members (M= 9.56) than males (M=8.99), a greater perceived mattering to friends (females M=2.60/males 2.43), and slightly higher perceived mattering in college (females M=2.40/males M=2.30) with increased levels of academic stress (females M=3.60/ males M=3.12). This suggests that increased mattering with individuals may lead to increased mattering to transitional students and the groups, organizations, and college campuses they participate in.

More recently, student activists at a Midwestern public university reported marginalization while interacting with student affairs professionals (Rosati et al., 2019). The ten female student activists were between 19 and 22 years old and identified as white (Rosati et al., 2019). The participants expressed misunderstandings and did not feel listened to. They shared instances where students felt the relationship between the student affairs professionals and the student organization was not genuine (Rosati et al., 2019). Therefore, engaged student activists can feel marginalized and unvalued when interacting with crucial administration in a campus setting. For marginalized women, potential interactions with the administration may keep them from persisting and completing their degree. Therefore, it is vital to understand the experiences of transitioning citizens in overcoming those feelings of marginalization to increase their self-worth and self-advocacy skills.

This research study, however, will look at older, non-traditional students who have additional responsibilities than the traditional college first-year students who identify as

Euro-American. These women may have limited family support (Willging et al., 2015) and may be employed and have to overcome academic stress as older, non-traditional students. Supports such as tutoring, counseling, and academic advisement are available at a college campus; however, commuter students may not readily use these services (Kasworm, 2014) since they may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the support available on campus.

Schlossberg et al. (1990) developed the Mattering Scales for Adult Students in Postsecondary Education. The tool was created to help identify the mattering beliefs of adult college students. However, the construct of mattering within the higher education field has been studied and measured limitedly (Tovar et al., 2009). In addition, studies of women with conviction histories in a college setting are limited. Therefore, to further understand the construct of mattering for this marginal group of women, this study will use the theory to identify how successfully marginalized women with conviction histories transition into college and their surrounding communities.

Literature Review

Successful prisoner reintegration cannot be achieved with a one-size-fits-all strategy. The mass incarceration of women in the past 40 years poses unique challenges for women reentering society. Reentry is a "gendered phenomenon," and the experiences of women post-release are distinctly different from those of their male counterparts (Cobbina, 2010, p. 211). Their reentry is marked with several challenges that transitioning women must overcome if they are to desist from a life of crime (Huebner et al., 2010). Since there is limited research on women with criminal involvement and their transition to higher education, the literature in this study is compiled into the following areas: (1) the

history of educational initiatives within prisons, (2) the unfulfilled requirements of transitioning women, (3) difficulties faced by college students with criminal conviction histories.

History of Educational Initiatives Within Prisons

The Basic Educational Opportunity Program (the Pell Grant) was established as the Civil Rights Movement progressed. The 1972 Pell Grant offered financial assistance for undergraduates from low-income families and allowed prisoners to be educated. A large majority of incarcerated individuals come from economically disadvantaged communities and enter prison poorly educated, vocationally unskilled, and often suffering from childhood trauma and physical and psychological problems (Mallory, 2015; Western et al., 2015). During the same period, the 1973 Rockefeller Drug Laws gave rise to mass incarceration with the harshest drug sentencing laws in the country. With a sudden increase of individuals entering prison, by 1990, the Pell Grant was responsible for funding 350 in-prison higher education programs in state and federal facilities, allowing up to 27,000 incarcerated individuals to enroll in college classes (Craft et al., 2019). However, this rise was temporary.

In 1994, the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act barred incarcerated individuals from receiving Pell Grants while incarcerated. The following year, the New York Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) was also barred (Craft et al., 2019). These political actions significantly reduced the number of in-prison postsecondary initiatives in the United States. Postsecondary programs in New York State alone were decreased from 70 to 4 (Craft et al., 2019). As a result, participating in a college education program was impossible unless an individual was assigned to a prison with a college education program

(Craft et al., 2019; John Jay Institute for Justice and Opportunity, 2019). With few options, the selection process was exceedingly rigorous, resulting in a meager number of incarcerated individuals participating in college educational programs.

Second Chance Pell Pilot Program

In 2016, President Obama moved to reinstate the Pell Grant to federal prisons (Tietjen et al., 2018). Known as the Second Chance Pell Pilot Program (Mastrorilli, 2016), these grants were awarded to 67 colleges in 28 states with the funding necessary to supply a post-secondary education to 5,000 incarcerated men and women in state and federal prisons throughout the United States (Chestnut et al., 2022). This pilot program made post-secondary education a reality for an exceedingly small number of incarcerated individuals and even fewer women. Three parameters existed for selected individuals to enroll, including having earned a high school equivalency diploma, being on good behavior, and being scheduled to be released within the next five years (Department of Education, 2016).

In New York State, for the 2016-2017 academic year, 1,105 Second Chance Pell Grants (SCPG) were offered to six universities. Bard College worked with six correctional facilities throughout New York State. Of those six correctional facilities, only one, Taconic Correctional Facility, houses women. Additional SCPGs (Second Chance Pell Grants) were distributed between three City University of New York (CUNY) institutions: LaGuardia, Hostos, and John Jay. These grants educated those within Otisville and Queensborough Correctional Facilities, which only housed men. This, again, demonstrates the scarce opportunities for women to earn a post-secondary credential while incarcerated.

SCPGs began with 67 colleges and universities nationwide conducting college-in-prison programs in 28 states and have since expanded to include 203 higher education opportunity programs in 48 states (Chestnut et al., 2022). Although women accounted for 15% of students enrolled in college courses, by 2021, they accounted for only 7% of earned college credentials. By contrast, men accounted for 93% of graduates and 85% of enrolled students (Chestnut et al., 2022).

Even with the SCPG in place, racial inequities persist. The Vera Institute (Chestnut et al., 2022) discovered that white students made up 43% of SCPG participants despite accounting for only 30% of the prison population. Meanwhile, although accounting for 33% and 23% of the prison population, respectively, 29 percent of students were Black, and 8% identified as Latino.

After 26 years, the ban on in-prison college education programs was lifted on December 27th, 2020 (Martinez-Hill, 2021; Chestnut et al., May 2022). By July of 2023, incarcerated individuals could once again apply to receive federal financial aid (Pell Grant) to support a post-secondary education while incarcerated. Financial assistance will allow detained individuals to pursue postsecondary education and develop competitive skills and qualifications to help them flourish when they return to their communities.

Using federal funding to expand educational programming within correctional institutions is necessary. However, developing and expanding programs has its challenges. Some colleges may lack the resources to expand their programs (Pearson & Heckert, 2020). Expanding an existing in-prison college education opportunity requires additional staffing and financial support to ensure the program remains rigorous and meets the college learning standards. However, since every prison operates differently (National

Research Council, 2014), specific characteristics of the prison environment can continue limiting educational opportunities. Depending on the administration of the correctional facility, limitations on the number of degrees and course offerings by the college, access to adequate space, and the approval of instructional materials (Pearson & Heckert, 2020), these educational programs can remain limited. There is also the perception that incarcerated individuals do not deserve free or low-cost college education when college costs are a challenge for families with non-incarcerated young adult children (Leone & Wruble, 2017). Additionally, correctional staff could also be resistant to additional program opportunities.

Although interest in teaching within prisons is increasing, there are consistent complaints from faculty, which represents yet another barrier to offering incarcerated women educational opportunities. In addition to the travel time and distance to the facility, faculty complaints include the restrictions on materials allowed to enter the prison and the kinds of coursework that can be offered (Pearson & Heckert, 2020). Faculty undergo a rigorous process to have materials approved to teach within the prison. Any failure to plan or communicate changes in instructional materials well in advance to prison officials can result in faculty being turned away and classes being canceled (Craft et al., 2019), creating inconsistencies in learning and frustrating students and faculty.

Even with these obstacles, using federal and state dollars to fund in-prison education programs is vital to change the reentry landscape (Pearson & Heckert, 2020). A well-designed and expanded prison education program reduces recidivism and creates safer communities by allowing individuals to develop their skills and credentials (Ross, 2019; Leone & Wruble, 2017; Hudson, 2013; Foster, 2005). For the expansion of Pell Grants to

be as effective as possible, restrictions regarding educational materials, resources, and additional prison staffing to ensure program success should be evaluated (Pearson & Heckert, 2020). The politicization behind this decision is concerning, as prison-imposed restrictions can prevent this expansion of the restoration of Pell Grants from reaching its full potential. There is also the concern that legislative leaders can once again ban federal funding for in-prison education programs in the future.

In-prison Education and Recidivism

Hui Kim and Clarke (2013) researched the effects of a prison-based college education program on recidivism. The authors define recidivism as "any arrest for a crime offered within three years of release" (Hui Kim & Clarke, 2013, p. 198). Their study utilized limited data from prisoners from the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) and the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (NYS DOCCS). They identified 347 incarcerated offenders who earned a one-year college certificate or higher. The researchers then utilized a Propensity Score Matching (PSM) tool to match the 49 covariates and created a similar comparison group. Although the proportion of women in this study is relatively small, it is "similar to the general population of female offenders who were released from NYS prisons" during that timeframe (Hui Kim & Clarke, 2013, p. 199).

Using prison education as a treatment, the researchers found a statistically significant difference between the control and treatment groups after three years of release. After three years, the control group had a recidivism rate of 17.1, and the treatment group had a rate of 9.4 after matching. This study demonstrates that after a

three-year follow-up, those who were able to participate in a prison-based college education program were significantly less likely to recidivate upon release.

A limited study on 18 male participants suggests additional positive outcomes of achieving an in-prison college education, including a connection to peers, improved communication skills, and developed integrity and confidence (Pelletier & Evans, 2019; Chestnut et al., 2022). Upon reentry, critical thinking skills, increased leadership, and a positive self-image assisted 13 of its participants in finding employment within a brief period after their release (Pelletier & Evans, 2019). This demonstrates the causal relationship between in-prison education programs and success after the transitioning citizens' reentry period.

These findings are significant, however, the emphasis on recidivism as the primary metric to evaluate post-release success ignores progress in other domains essential to the success of transitioning citizens returning to communities. Areas including post-incarceration education, health, family, and employment are not measured (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2022). According to the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2022), the use of recidivism rates to evaluate post-release success ignores significant research on how and why individuals cease to commit crimes, especially women.

Inequality in Educational Offerings

In a report compiled by the United States General Accounting Office to Congress (1980), prison programs have a history of reinforcing gender roles. Since 1980, incarcerated women have argued against inequitable treatment. Moreover, the failure to supply educational programming is a violation of the 14th Amendment as "women are not

provided the same range of opportunities available in male [prisons]" (General

Accounting Office to Congress, 1980, p. 17). In addition, although in-prison

postsecondary programs are expanding as a result of the Second Chance Pell Program

(Mastrorilli, 2016), it is clear that incarcerated women continue to experience uneven

access to educational opportunities within state prisons.

Currently, Texas has the most significant female prison population in the United

States. The female prison population has grown by 908% since 1980 (Linder, 2018).

Nevertheless, according to the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition, the Texas State

Correctional facilities offer 21 job certificate programs to men and only two for women.

The two programs offered to women include office administration and culinary arts, which

are educational programs that reinforce gender roles (Linder, 2018). Men, however, have

an opportunity to earn a master's degree, while the only choice afforded to women is a

Liberal Arts associate degree (Linder, 2018). Therefore, women wanting to earn a

bachelor's degree must transfer or reenroll with the college once released. Understanding

the process can be highly challenging, even with adequate support.

Reentry Challenges for Women

Limited Access to Resources

Even though a more significant proportion of incarcerated women possess a high

school diploma compared to incarcerated men (Tietjen et al., 2018), their access to in-

prison college education opportunities remains limited (Sokoloff & Fontaine, 2017). The

lack of access to educational programming furthers social inequality (Tietjen et al., 2018).

Women interested in a college degree often have to wait until they are released. Although

there is a rise in the number of women now participating in college education programs,

many others still return home without the ability to change the outcome of potential reincarceration, as there is a correlation between educational attainment and criminal behavior (Western et al., 2016).

College is an experience that is becoming increasingly significant in influencing collective and individual achievement (Bowers & Bergman, 2016). The literature contains very little theory and research focusing on the college experiences of students with criminal records and the transition to college post-incarceration (Sokoloff & Fontaine, 2017). A gap in the literature also exists in understanding the individual's personal growth, decision-making process, and surrounding community. This study will utilize applicable data and the voices' of transitioning citizens to help fill this gap.

The National Institute of Justice, Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI (Lattimore & Visher, 2010), discovered that adult females have a much higher demand for support than males (Garcia & Ritter, 2012). During pre-release interviews of 357 incarcerated women in 11 states, 95% of women indicated education, employment, and job training as areas of needed support (Garcia & Ritter, 2012). The National Research Council (2014) suggests that if large numbers of disadvantaged and transitioning women stay in or return to poor communities without support, the effects could be broadly harmful. A narrative method will provide a more detailed and informative way of understanding the experiences of women transitioning to college and community post-incarceration, highlighting the support and educational opportunities they need.

Hart's (2017) yearlong ethnographic study explored how imprisoned women prepare for release. The purposive sample included women between the ages of 21 and 40 interviewed during the last three months of a 3-year or longer sentence. The findings

suggest that women prisoners have a strong incentive and determination to desist from crimes once released (Hart, 2017). However, the prison system does not provide women with the "required tools to negotiate what is an increasingly complex" transition back to society (Hart, 2017, p. 156).

According to Hart (2017), the long-term goals for these women were to seek employment and/or attend college. Most women in this study wanted to continue their education after release to supplement any skills they gained while incarcerated. However, their efforts to prepare for release are hampered by a severe absence of social, cultural, and economic resources (Hart, 2017). A small minority of women do have the ability to construct and build a crime-free life on release. However, these women must overcome socioeconomic obstacles, such as seeking housing with limited work opportunities and low educational attainment. This not only results in many women being released with no resources to help them fulfill their goals, but it also highlights the issues with a justice system focused on male-centered ability.

Scroggins and Mally (2010) also identified similar areas critical to women's post-incarceration societal transition. The data for this analysis came from publicly accessible, online descriptions of 155 reentry programs and their services in ten of the largest metropolitan areas of the United States (Scroggins & Mally, 2010). The criteria for selecting these programs in their sample was to "simulate results that a reentry woman might find if she were looking for program information without the assistance of a parole officer or other offender rehabilitation professionals" (Scroggins & Mally, 2010, p. 152). The programs needed to promote "reentry services" to women with information on

program services and eligibility requirements publicly available on the website (Scroggins & Mally, 2010).

Their findings suggest that education was the most widely offered reentry service to women (Scroggins & Mally, 2010). However, many programs are for women without a high school credential. "Approximately one-third of incarcerated women have a high school diploma or its equivalent upon incarceration," with additional women completing the credential while incarcerated (Scroggins & Mally, 2010). Attainment of a college degree would lead to increased employment opportunities and salaries for women. However, Scroggins & Mally (2010) show that women who enter the system with a high school diploma or gain one while incarcerated are at a disadvantage. Without a formal education, women cannot compete in the labor market and are likelier to remain in poverty and deal with economic challenges (Belfield & Bailey, 2011). These women will also likely remain in the community where they committed their first offense.

Limited access to resources seems to be a recurring theme in the literature. Access to supportive programs was a stated challenge for women released from prison. According to Kellet and Willing (2011), "Women were given minimal guidance on how to prepare for the shock of reentry, navigate structural barriers, or access resources" (p. 256). The women in this study believed they were responsible for their success, and several women experienced guilt when they did not meet their expectations once released from prison. This feeling of guilt and failure of not meeting expectations may lead to additional criminal behavior and can contribute to higher recidivism rates amongst women.

The women who experienced reentry discussed anxiety because of parole obligations, needing to find employment and housing, and taking part in counseling/treatment (Kellet

& Willing, 2011). Many participants also stressed concerns about returning to old social networks in which drug and alcohol use is common. Thus, returning to criminal and delinquent behaviors as "defense mechanisms" is a response to tension from conflict between the personality and the inner self (Kellet & Willging, 2011, p. 260). Thus, one's reintegration into society often involves grappling with inner conflicts and challenges, particularly when seeking employment.

Numerous factors can negatively affect an individual attempting to obtain employment following incarceration (Snodgrass et al., 2017). Returning citizens face employment barriers due to both personal and systematic factors. Many lack qualifications and educational experience, which causes obstructions in the search process. In this study, participants were older (aged 41-53), and of the eight women, two had no formal high school credential, three had earned a General Education Diploma (GED), and two had their high school diploma. Only one had earned an associate degree (Snodgrass et al., 2017).

Knowing many companies often require a criminal background check, women shared that being categorized as an "ex-offender or felon" negatively influenced their employment search. This notion of "sinking thinking" is where participants' thoughts and beliefs are an additional barrier to employment success (Snodgrass et al., 2017, page number). Therefore, counselors from post-release programs, such as the one in this study, are in a "unique position to contribute positively to women's reentry" (Snodgrass et al., 2017, p. 29). By working closely with a career counselor, the study supports the importance of using a strengths-based approach in building skillsets to help overcome the barriers to employment for this marginalized population.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Self Harm

Researchers Howard, Karatzias, Power, and Mahoney (2017) surveyed the functions of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms, emotion control, dissociation, and the pathways to self-harm following childhood trauma in incarcerated women. Using childhood trauma as a predictor and self-harm as the outcome variable, the findings suggest 85.4% of incarcerated women participants reported some form of childhood trauma, with 58% of the women documenting a history of self-harm. These findings suggest limitations in women receiving the therapeutic support to overcome trauma, resulting in a higher prevalence of victimization and post-traumatic stress disorder.

The importance of this study is developing interventions that can support women in overcoming their PTSD and self-harm ideations. Without adequate support and therapies for incarcerated women and those who are transitioning to society, many women will not have the motivation to identify goals to live as functioning members of society. The mental health issues women struggle with must be addressed upon reentry. Their past traumas can directly affect their ability to further their education and develop their skill sets for employment purposes. The gap in the literature is to address how women with mental health needs can successfully attend a post-secondary institution to obtain employment as active citizens.

Return to Substance Abuse

When compared to detained men, women expressed that they often felt invisible, desexualized, and were subjected to a culture of alienation (Rockwell, 2012). In addition, although women make up only 7% of the total prison population in the United States, Kilgore (2015) found that incarcerated women accounted for 33% of reported sexual

assaults by staff members. Therefore, an individual preparing for reentry may find coping difficult, making the transition even more challenging. Women with a criminal history often report using alcohol and other drugs to relieve emotional and physical pain connected to victimization caused by prison and childhood traumas (Ayres, 2021). In a study on drug usage after release (Rowell-Cunsolo et al., 2016), female participants started taking drugs sooner than male participants. The median number of days to return to drug use was 30 days for men and one day for women (Rowell-Cunsolo et al., 2016). This suggests that women are not adequately prepared for their release from prison. The lack of rehabilitative and educational programming continues to cause women to cycle in and out of prison.

Prison to College Pipeline

Higher education is regarded as a rite of passage in the United States, a moment in one's life that marks the transition into adulthood (Halkovic & Greene, 2015). However, incarceration changes the trajectory of the individual's life and disrupts one's educational pursuits. For the small percentage of those who could pursue a college degree while incarcerated, there is a much larger number of those who did and do not have that opportunity.

There are many studies on the efficacy of in-prison college programs and the reduction of recidivism rates for people who participate (Hui Kim & Clark, 2013). However, there is little research on students' experiences with college post-incarceration (Halkovic & Greene, 2015). College students with criminal records are a protected, unrepresented, and minoritized student population (McTier et al., 2017). For many applicants with conviction histories, the admissions process acts as a structural barrier to

both higher education and a smooth transition from prison to community life (Halkovic & Greene, 2015; Pierce et al., 2014). Many public community colleges do not require students to disclose their criminal histories (Halkovic & Greene, 2015). However, the Common Application, which over 500 colleges and universities use in 47 states, the District of Columbia, and eleven foreign countries (commonapp.org), asks questions about a person's criminal history and minor offenses, further deterring applicants (Halkovic & Greene, 2015; Pierce et al, 2014)). Even the State University of New York (SUNY) discourages applicants with questions regarding previous convictions (Halkovic & Greene, 2015; Rose, 2015). Therefore, many students with conviction histories are limited to public community colleges to pursue a college education.

Even with the SCPG being reinstated in July of 2023, a large percentage of women will exit prison without a degree, even if they participate in a few college-level courses. Researchers McTier, Santa-Ramirez, and McGuire (2017) used a constructivist perspective to understand the college experiences of four individuals with criminal conviction histories pursuing their education. Although the participant profiles and demographics vary, only one participant identified as female. This demonstrates the limited presence of research on women with conviction histories seeking a college degree.

The students in this study shared that their support networks (friends, family, or therapists) suggested they enroll in college once released from prison. The study found that individuals are conflicted about disclosing information for fear of stigmatization and other repercussions (McTier et al., 2017). Unfortunately, "criminal records follow people throughout their lives, long after they have completed their sentence, dictating how individuals with such histories can participate in society" (Halkovic & Green, 2015, p.

765). Even with the Clean Slate Initiatives passed in 12 states across the United States, transitioning citizens would need to wait eight years for a felony conviction and three years for a misdemeanor before their records can be sealed (Kinsky et al., 2022). Therefore, a challenge for this population is the fear of background checks and fingerprint clearances (McTier et al., 2017) required for internships, fellowships, and licensing credentials. The results of background checks further deter individuals with criminal histories from completing college, as sealing records is an arduous task that requires time, patience, and financial resources.

Sixty percent of adult learners enrolled in a two-year college do not earn their degree within six years (Kim & Bakers, 2015). This illustrates that many adult learners require flexibility, alternative funding beyond (or in addition to) the federal government (Pell Grants), and access to resources to support their pursuit of a college degree. In addition, the multiple roles and commitments that adult women must navigate upon returning to society as parents, caretakers, and/or employees will affect the time it will take to earn a college credential.

Colleges alone are not successful in supporting students with criminal conviction histories. Transitioning women have different worries, issues, and problems than mainstream students at colleges and universities (Abrams & Franke, 2013). They require additional support navigating the admissions and enrollment processes. Additionally, as students, they require financial, emotional, and technological support to continue as successful students.

As the rest of the world has catapulted into the digital age, correctional facilities limit access to digital technology (Seo et al., 2021). Women in transition are rarely

exposed to innovative technology as incarceration keeps them from a digital environment (Seo et al., 2021). Therefore, technology is an additional barrier for transitioning women entering college. This is relevant as many college courses can be completed online, allowing the transitioning woman to more easily meet competing needs, such as work, parenting, meeting with parole or probation officers, and other mandated programs.

Relationship Between Prior Research and Present Study

Educating someone with a criminal conviction history would have several advantages, including tangible savings for society through reduced recidivism costs, lower crime rates, and decreased welfare and foster care subsidies (McTier et al., 2017). Additional benefits would include, financial boosts to the economy through increased employability, earning, and buying power. With improved self-esteem, self-worth, and self-preparation, transitioning women with a college education can thrive, leaving their past behind them and living a fulfilling life post-incarceration.

There are many barriers and obstacles that women must overcome when they return to society. The literature review demonstrates these challenges, including the fear of stigmatization and overcoming previous traumas and drug addiction histories. This literature connects to this study as it seeks to understand women's transition to their community and college experience. Through a narrative approach, the researcher can share women's lived experiences that can contribute to the limited literature.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the theoretical frameworks that will guide this study discussed the myriad challenges women with conviction histories face. Only recently, through the SCPG, have women begun to participate in college programs provided in prisons.

However, racial and gender disparities still exist, with only 7% of women earning a college credential prior to their release (Chestnut et al., 2022). Many women will still have challenges to overcome once released if they choose to enter or continue to work on earning a college credential while navigating their reintegration into their community.

In the next chapter, the researcher will review the methods and procedures for data collection. As mentioned, a personal narrative approach will shed more light on how women with conviction histories make sense of their experiences transitioning to the community and college to earn a college degree.

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides an overview of this study's methodology and procedures for data collection. This qualitative narrative study explores the journey of previously incarcerated women transitioning into their community. A secondary purpose is understanding their perceptions of access and success in a college setting post-incarceration. Creswell & Poth (2018) posit, "Narrative research is best for capturing the details, stories or life experiences of a single individual or the lives of a small number of individuals" (p. 71). Accordingly, this qualitative narrative study provides further insight into how transitioning women desist from a life of crime and achieve personal and educational success. This research will use a personal narrative approach to distinguish the connection from each participant's past, present, and *future* (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

This methodology prioritizes a narrative data collection process with a narrative presentation of results over the traditional quantitative method. This chapter explains the components of this research design, including a restatement of the research questions, the method utilized to collect data with a description of participants, the sample size, and procedures to analyze the data. The chapter concludes with an overview of the research ethics utilized to complete this study.

Specific Research Questions

The following research questions are essential in guiding this study:

RQ1: What are women's experiences transitioning into society after incarceration, including participation in post-secondary education?

RQ2: How do women engage and interact with support within their surrounding community, including the college environment?

RQ3: How do women identify success post-incarceration?

Research Design and Data Analysis

This study utilized a qualitative methodology with a narrative design. The qualitative method was selected because it coincides with the purpose of the study, which is to explore the journeys of women and their transition to their community and within a college setting post-incarceration. Stories are central to human experience, and narrative inquiry focuses on weaving together various facts, events, and experiences to understand how things go, have gone, and are likely to go in the future (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) discuss two dimensions based on Dewey's interaction concept. Dewey's primary position in thinking about narrative inquiry is three-dimensional and includes "personal and social (interaction); past, present, and future (continuity); and place (situation)" (p. 50). Narratives encompass all experiences, from the mundane to the extraordinary, with each event considered a potentially valuable source of knowledge (Conner, 2011). Therefore, this narrative inquiry will focus on the personal and social experiences of the participants in appropriate proportion to the situations they describe. It considers the emotional and social experiences outlined by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) that can span specific places or a series of locations, such as an individual's immediate community through their reintegration, including their post-secondary experiences.

Qualitative research methods focus on the participant experience and embrace the contextual nature of that experience (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). There are many powerful examples of the uses of individuals' lived experiences as data sources in narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandini, 1990). The narrative design provides participants a voice to share their experiences and truths about a topic (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

This approach is appropriate for the study's goal since it allows the researcher to analyze the transitional path of formerly incarcerated women and their community and college experiences. This method allows the researcher to understand the experiences of perceived barriers to integrating into their community, how they access and succeed in college, and how they define their accomplishments. As a result, using a narrative approach preserves the individual's voice while investigating how individuals make sense of life's challenges and opportunities by closely analyzing and presenting narrative data. This approach thoroughly contextualizes individuals' lives, allowing for the examination of crucial elements such as culture, identity, and history, as highlighted by Creswell and Poth (2018).

Setting

When recruiting individuals for this study, the researcher sought 6-8 women of any race or ethnic background in an urban area. This setting is needed to provide a more diverse data set of women with incarceration experience attending public or private universities within this urban area. Each participant had incarceration experience, is 21 years old or older, is currently enrolled in a public or private undergraduate institution, or is a recent alumnus within this urban area.

The researcher accessed these women by sharing the flyer (Appendix A) through a listserv with community agencies, colleges, and universities supporting formerly incarcerated men and women. The flyer was also shared on social networks, including LinkedIn, Facebook, and Instagram. Those interested in participating completed a Pre-Interview Questionnaire (Appendix B) that requested demographic and postsecondary

education information (Glesne, 2011; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher then used this data to follow up and schedule interviews via email with qualified participants.

To ensure adequate protection of the rights and welfare of individuals participating as subjects in this research study, the researcher took an additional precaution to protect each participant's identity. Individuals who indicated they were college students or recent alumni of the institution where the researcher is currently employed were not eligible to participate. As a protected class, it is challenging to learn about the success of these women post-incarceration. Therefore, this narrative study was constructed to gain an unbiased understanding of participants' lived experiences of their transition from incarceration to their community and through their college experiences.

As qualitative research, this study focuses more on the process of the experience with the participant than on the outcome. Every effort was made to maintain the integrity of this study and the data collection while protecting the anonymity of the research participants. This guarantees that the results accurately represent the facts and will contribute to the literature on the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated women.

Participants

The eight participants for this study had former incarceration experience, were currently enrolled in college, or were recent graduates from an undergraduate degree program from one urban area in the northeast. This study utilized purposive and snowball sampling to allow the researcher to recruit individuals following a specific criterion (Glesne, 2011). Snowball sampling enabled the researcher to access individuals via referrals for this phenomenon (Glesne, 2011). Once identified, these women consented to share their experiences of reintegration and provide contextual information about their

transition into the community and postsecondary experiences (Glesne, 2011; Creswell &

Poth, 2018). To participate in this study, individuals met the following criteria:

1. Each participant identified as a female of any race/ethnicity.

2. Each participant identified as being above the age of 21.

3. Each participant had experience with incarceration within the United States.

4. Each participant was a current undergraduate student or a recent alumna from a
   college within the urban area, as highlighted in Tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Characteristics

Pseudonym	Age	Race/ Ethnicity	Total Years of Incarceration	Year of Release
Jessy	25	Black	1-3	2022
Seliney	27	Black	1-3	2021
Nasha	32	Black	7-10	2018
Liz	32	White	1-3	2012
Tricka	33	Black	7-10	2019
Jane	40	White	1-3	2021
Assenavi	43	Hispanic	11-20	2020
Pam	64	Black	11-20	2004

Table 2

Participant Educational Experiences

Pseudonym	Undergraduate Degree-Seeking or Achieved	Type of institution	In-Prison Education Experience
Jessy	BA/BS	Private	No
Seliney	BA/BS	Private	No
Nasha	BA/BS	Public	Yes
Liz	JD	Private	No
Tricka	MA	Public	Yes
Jane	BA/BS	Private	Yes

| Assenavi | PhD | Private | Yes |
| Pam | AA/AS/AAS | Public | No |

As demonstrated in Table 1, the sample (N=8) was comprised entirely of participants who identified as women (N=8, 100%). Participants ranged from 25-64 years of age. Three groups represented the racial and ethnic diversity of the sample: Black (62.5%), White (25%), and Hispanic/Latinx (12.5%). In Table 2, 50% (N=4) of the participants had In-Prison Education experience, and 37.5% (N=3) recently completed their undergraduate degree and are currently enrolled in a graduate program.

Data Collection Methods

To collect data for this study, the research flyer (Appendix A) detailing the study and its participation requirements included a QR code and active link for the Pre-Interview Questionnaire (Appendix B). The flyer was then distributed to a listserv of community organizations and colleges that support formerly incarcerated men and women within this urban area. The research flyer (Appendix A) was also shared on the following social media pages: LinkedIn, Facebook, and Instagram. Interested participants completed the Pre-Interview Questionnaire (Appendix B) and provided demographic information electronically through Microsoft Forms. Data such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, marital status, number of children, length of incarceration, and their university's name and current degree being sought were recorded. These questions aimed to gain insight, determine the eligibility of research participants, and analyze for descriptive coding purposes. Eighteen individuals completed the Pre-Interview Questionnaire (Appendix B), demonstrating interest. Twelve eligible participants for the study were emailed the consent form to arrange for the three semi-structured interviews between October and December of 2023.

Semi Structured Interviews

The researcher completed a series of interviews with eight participants through a semi-structured interview format to better understand the transitional process for women from incarceration to the community and through their college experience (Glesne, 2011; Creswell,2013). The interview protocol (Appendix E) was created to guide the researcher and the participants during the interview process. According to Klenke (2008), this method is the most appropriate whenever interviewers seek participants to share an authentic account of a subjective experience. Narrative inquiry is a collaborative process involving mutual storytelling and re-storying as the research proceeds (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). This method allowed the researcher to go beyond the superficial responses that can be received to obtain an accurate meaning of what respondents assign to their experiences.

The semi-structured interview allowed the researcher to ask participants about their transition, college experience, and personal achievements since their release. The three interview questions included follow-up questions that were aligned with the theoretical frameworks and narrative methodology (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). For question development, the interview questions were piloted by two women who have experienced incarceration and obtained a college degree after release. These two women reviewed the interview questions, their sequence, and their alignment with the research questions, as displayed in Table 2. The feedback allowed the researcher to update and realign the interview questions while reducing researcher bias (Yeonget al, 2018). Researcher bias occurs when the researcher injects their thoughts, values, and opinions (Yeonget al, 2018), affecting the study results.

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All eight women participated virtually in three semi-structured interviews through Cisco WebEx to accommodate various schedules. The researcher utilized an Interview Protocol (Appendix E) with all participants to ensure the same pertinent questions were asked during the three-interview sequence. Table 3 provides the interview themes and their alignment with the research questions.

Table 3

Interview Timeline and Connection to Research Questions

Interview Session	Interview Questions	Connection to Research Questions
I	Theme: Reentry/Transition experience Question: Tell me about your reentry/transition experience. Follow-up questions *(if needed):* • What were some challenges you had to overcome? • What interactions within your immediate community did you find valuable? • Who or what made an impact on your transition?	RQ1: What are women's experiences transitioning into society after incarceration, including participation in post-secondary education? RQ2: How do women engage and interact with support within their surrounding community, including the college environment?
II	Theme: College Experience Question: Please tell me about your decision to enroll in college. When did it occur, and what was your motivation? Follow-up questions *(if needed):* • What support did you seek in your community and the college to get you where you are today? • What do you believe colleges need to know about supporting women with incarceration experience in earning their degrees?	RQ1: What are women's experiences transitioning into society after incarceration, including participation in post-secondary education? RQ2: How do women engage and interact with support within their surrounding community, including the college environment? RQ3: How do women identify success post-incarceration?
III	Theme: How do women identify success post-incarceration?	RQ2: How do women engage and interact with support within their

| Question: Tell me about a personal achievement you have made since returning home. What was it, and who was involved?
Follow-up questions (if needed):
• Were there any previous life experiences that helped you in that moment?
• Were there any people or programs that helped you with this achievement? | surrounding community, including the college environment?

RQ3: How do women identify success post-incarceration? |

Each interview was conducted privately and had a distinct topic to discuss experiences post-incarceration. The first interview focused on their reentry/transition experiences, the second on their college experience, and the third on identified personal achievements post-incarceration. After completing the three interviews, each participant received a $30 Amazon gift card.

Six of the eight participants were comfortable having their cameras on during the interview. During each interview, observer memos were made, including details of body language and actions shared. The memo creation provides rigor to the study and allows for transferability (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Trustworthiness

The researcher demonstrated various methods to establish trustworthiness within this study. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) explained, trustworthiness is established when findings reflect the meanings described by participants. In addition, trustworthiness results from rigorous scholarship that includes defined procedures. The first measure to establish trustworthiness was piloting the semi-structured interview questions with women who have shared similar experiences as the participants in the study. The second measure

ensured the interview questions aligned with the research and theoretical frameworks. This process also helps reduce instances of researcher bias. Furthermore, during the initial interview, the researcher cross-referenced the information gathered from the Pre-Interview Questionnaire (see Appendix B) and made any required adjustments to ensure the credibility of the collected data.

Narrative analysis involves individuals sharing their lived experiences with the researcher. Creswell and Miller (2000) posit, that to maintain reliability, a narrative study should focus on the individual and collect stories and the chronology of a significant issue. This will allow the researcher to tell a story and embed reflexivity. Therefore, at the end of each interview, the researcher reviewed critical points with each participant to ensure the collected data's accuracy, relevance, and trustworthiness.

To ensure the participants' points were clear to the researcher for retelling, thick and rich descriptions were made to the researcher's analytic memos. Thick and rich descriptions provide a comprehensive and detailed description of the research setting and participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990; Creswell & Miller, 2000). These detailed descriptions help to understand the context and cultural, historical, and social factors influencing the participants. This process ensures that the findings are grounded in the realities of the experiences of transitioning women.

This narrative analysis included self-reflection and researcher reflexivity to ensure triangulation. As a researcher, I kept a reflective journal, documenting insights and reflections on how my background and positionality might shape the research process and outcomes. Maintaining self-awareness allowed me to separate myself as an administrator

from my role as a researcher when analyzing and controlling biases during the data analysis.

To account for transferability, the researcher selected a population sample that appropriately represents the research topic and includes descriptive details of each participant. The researcher ensured that different perspectives were represented by gathering a purposeful sample of women who had been incarcerated for varying lengths of time, had different majors and interests within public and private universities, and were of varying ages and ethnicities, allowing for triangulation. Therefore, through purposeful sampling, this study provides the broadest possible range of information for reliability and validity purposes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

As a researcher, it is recommended that a second party who is not entirely invested in the research review the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This can be accomplished through informal peer debriefing, in which the researcher's biases are explored, allowing the peer to keep the researcher honest about their findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), this allows the reader to assess whether the findings can be applied. Creswell and Poth (2018) recommend that the researcher check the raw data shortly after it is collected to provide any additional descriptions that may be useful during the analysis. In addition to the detailed description, the researcher ensured that the interviews were consistent (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and that the protocol was implemented.

Data Analysis

For this study, I selected a narrative analysis methodology to explore the lived experiences of eight women as they transitioned from a period of incarceration to their

communities and through college. Since narrative studies examine large bodies of

transcribed texts, following a qualitative content analysis is essential to explore and

understand the meaning individuals ascribe to a social or human problem (Smith, 2000;

Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In addition, it is critical to demonstrate that the research

questions are in alignment with the theoretical frameworks, which include

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1977) and Schlossberg's Marginality and

Mattering Theory (1989), as depicted in Table 4:

Table 4

Research Questions and Alignment

Research Question	Alignment to Ecological Systems Framework, Marginality, and Mattering
RQ1: What are women's experiences transitioning into society after incarceration, including participation in post-secondary education?	The EFS allows individuals to identify positive and challenging relationships with people, groups, organizations, and society at large (Miller et al., 2021). Marginality arises when people, such as college students, take on a new role. Having women participants provide their perspectives allows for a robust understanding of the transition to college and measures the five aspects of mattering (Schlossberg et al., 1989).
RQ2: How do women engage and interact with support within their surrounding community, including the college environment?	Bronfenbrenner's (1977) Ecological Systems Framework (EFS) suggests that how one interacts within one's immediate community plays a crucial role in shaping one's mindset and how one interacts and transitions within one's nested systems. Schlossberg (1989) suggests that once individuals believe they matter to others, their feelings of marginality decline.
RQ3: How do women identify success post-incarceration?	.The ESF theory explores individuals' interaction and proximal relationships with various environmental systems contributing to a particular outcome (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

Semi-Structured Interviews

A qualitative content analysis was completed after conducting three semi-structured interviews over Cisco WebEx. Semi-structured interview transcripts and notes contain thick, rich descriptions that could form pictures to relive the moment (Saldaña, 2016; Bogdan & Biklen, 2016). Before the transcriptions, the researcher listened to each recording to assist in developing a vivid picture of the conversation that occurred throughout the interview process.

After each interview, the researcher used Rev software to accurately transcribe the recordings and appropriately reflect the words of each participant. The researcher ensured the data accuracy of each interview by cross-checking the transcribed texts against the audio/video recordings multiple times and as needed. Once transcribed and cross-checked, the researcher attentively read through the transcribed data of the participants' stories (interviews one through three) to make impressions and fully understand the participants' lived experiences from the moment of their release (O'Leary, 2014). This allowed the researcher to highlight significant participant quotes, organize the journey, and get a feel for the transcribed data. The transcribed files were then uploaded to Delve Tool software to begin content analysis. Both software programs were password-protected to ensure the security and anonymity of each participant.

Data analysis involves a series of interconnected phases, including data organization, a preliminary read-through of the database, coding and arranging themes, data representation, and data interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As per Miles et al.

(2014), researchers should analyze data as it is collected to prevent the need to gather additional data to address gaps or test new hypotheses during the analysis phase.

Once uploaded to the Delve Tool software, the researcher began coding. Saldaña (2016) defines coding in a qualitative inquiry as "a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (p. 4). The researcher created a start list of codes (Appendix F) that was also reviewed by two women with lived experiences who were not participants in this study. InVivo coding was then used to honor the voices of the study participants (Saldaña, 2016). Through this method, the researcher went line by line and identified repeated sentiments throughout the transcripts, which provided an understanding of what was important to participants through their journey (Saldaña, 2016). Over 200 InVivo codes were identified through this method. In the third round, values coding (Saldaña, 2016) was conducted to explore the values, attitudes, and beliefs representing the participants' experiences. According to Saldaña (2016), social interaction, organizations, and cultural and religious ties are all significant in shaping, maintaining, and altering values, attitudes, and beliefs. The coded units according to value, attitudes, and beliefs assisted in establishing common themes, patterns, and connections using the actual language in the data record.

Research Ethics

Research participants were accessed through purposive and snowball sampling (Glesne, 2011) only after the IRB (Internal Review Board) was approved by St. John's University (1999). The researcher ensured that participants received all ethical considerations, such as respect, beneficence, and justice, as outlined in the Belmont

Report (Glesne, 2016, p. 159). All participants received a request for participation (Appendix C) and a consent form (Appendix D) detailing information about the study's purpose and confidentiality assurance via email in a PDF format. They were each asked to sign and scan the consent form before their first interview. The signed consent form acknowledges that their identity was fully protected. In addition, their rights as participants were stated at the beginning of each interview, with the option to remove themselves from the study at any time. Information was also shared on how their confidentiality would be maintained and the risk level associated with participating.

As a protective class, all interviews took place via Cisco WebEx. The interviews were conducted in a private setting to avoid interruptions. In addition, all ethical considerations were considered when handling data. The semi-structured interview rounds were recorded and uploaded with a secure password on Rev software. The Delve Tool software uses a secure username and passcode to maintain data security and participant anonymity. Therefore, the researcher is the only individual with access to this data.

Participants were also asked to provide a pseudonym for this study, as their real names would not be utilized. In addition, minimal identifying information about the participant's institution, agency affiliation, and employment experience has been redacted. Finally, all data collected for this study will be deleted after three years to align with St. John's University IRB policies and procedures (St. John's University,1999).

Researcher Role

Before conducting qualitative research, the researcher must identify possible research and participant biases that could impact the study's trustworthiness (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, in this role, the researcher piloted the interview questions to ensure they

were framed as open-ended, straightforward questions to prevent participants from agreeing or disagreeing and guiding them to provide a truthful and honest answer (Creswell, 2013). The researcher has also ensured that the questions avoided words that could introduce bias (Creswell, 2013). Finally, since this study utilized the lived experiences of human subjects, the participants were reminded of their rights and that they could remove themselves from the study at any time.

In 1998, Banks highlighted the significant impact of researchers' journeys on their values, research inquiries, and the knowledge they generate. As the researcher, I acknowledge that my background, both personal and professional experience, can shape my perspective in conducting this research study. Despite having experience supporting organizations working directly with this population to access higher education, the researcher can ensure maintaining objectivity throughout the study.

Conclusion

The literature on formerly incarcerated women transitioning to college is minimal. Therefore, this qualitative narrative study was conducted to examine the experiences of formerly incarcerated women and their reintegration into their community. The secondary purpose is to fully understand their experiences within the college setting. This chapter provided an overview of the narrative methodology, included a restatement of the research questions, described the targeted population, sample size, and data analysis methods, and a detailed data analysis approach. The chapter concludes by explaining researcher ethics as well as the role of the researcher. Chapter Four presents and discusses the research findings based on the experiences of the women participating in this study.

CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS

This study utilized a qualitative narrative approach to explore the journey of previously incarcerated women transitioning into their community and their lived experiences as current undergraduate or recent undergraduate alumni. When examining the intersectionality of women's incarceration and challenges to accessing higher education post-incarceration, several factors come into play, including gender, race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, stigma or discrimination, family, and mandated (probation/parole) responsibilities. However, there is a limited amount of literature that explores the experiences of women who have been incarcerated and successfully pursue higher education post-incarceration (Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017). This study will fill that gap.

The eight women (N=8) participating in this study completed three semi-structured interviews over twelve weeks as the primary data collection method. Each interview focused on a different subject, including their transition to their community post-release, their experiences to and through college, and identifying a personal achievement. This study was carefully designed to ensure that the women interviewed were not emotionally affected by sharing their experiences. Participants were reminded of their rights at the beginning of every interview. They had the right to withdraw their participation at any moment. As a result, participants were free to describe their experiences in as much detail as they wanted. And despite the jarring nature of particular testimonies, these women demonstrated extraordinary resilience and emotional maturity.

Data Analysis Process

Data collected for this study followed a qualitative content analysis approach. Each participant interview was transcribed accurately to reflect each participant's journey in their own words. Each transcript was reviewed against the recordings as often as needed to ensure accuracy. The researcher was allowed to interpret the qualitative data and identify the most commonly used words and phrases through coding. The researcher identified over 200 codes and phrases, organized them into themes, and categorized them thematically. The coding process also allowed the researcher to create participant profiles which include comprehensive insights into their diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives within the research context. Table 4 depicts how the codes were broken down into thematic categories.

Table 5

Initial Grouping of Thematic Categories

Codes	Frequency	Initial Thematic Category
Challenges	24	Transition Experience
Transitional Housing	24	
Housing Insecurity	18	
Mental Health	13	
Family Support	13	
Supervision (Parole/Probation)	13	
Stigma/Discrimination	12	
Restrictions	11	
Family Expectations	10	
COVID 19	6	
Community Involvement	38	Empowerment
Support System	37	
Motivation	31	
Gratitude	30	
Assistance	22	
Restorative Justice	22	
Values	21	

Access to resources	18	
Mentors/Friends	18	
Sharing Experience	14	
Self-Advocacy	14	
Civic Engagement	13	
College Experience	52	Post-Secondary
Educational Support	41	Experiences
Technology	22	
Educational Goals	21	
Prison Education Program	21	
College Programs	16	
College Transcripts	9	
Navigation Process	8	
Financial Aid	7	
College Major	7	
Academic Challenges	4	
Transferring	3	

Each participant's journey has been unique, encompassing diverse aspects such as their individual experiences while detained, and the transitional and educational pathways since their release. As such, the participant's voices serve as the primary catalyst for the findings. Every participant in this study will be introduced to share their transitional and educational experiences in their own words.

Participant Profiles

This section introduces the participants, as their voices are the driving force behind the findings. The participant profiles highlight the diverse backgrounds and experiences of the eight (N=8) women participating in this study. These profiles demonstrate the importance of addressing intersectional barriers and providing a comprehensive understanding of assisting women with succeeding through their transitional and educational journey post-release.

Pam is a resilient and determined 64-year-old African American woman who has overcome a myriad of challenges in life. After spending over a decade in prison, Pam was released in 2004, homeless and struggling with addiction. However, determined to be successful, Pam utilized public transportation to commute over two hours per day from her suburban community to receive outpatient substance abuse treatment from two organizations since options for women with incarceration experience were severely limited in her suburban community.

As a result of her addiction, Pam faced health setbacks with several ailments that have tested her physical and emotional strength. Pam has not only overcome her heroin addiction but is also a survivor of two open heart surgeries, spinal surgery, three hip replacements, a knee replacement, osteomyelitis, and carpal tunnel surgery on both hands. This demonstrates her strength, as Pam refuses to use a walker or any other assistive device.

Despite her age and health struggles, Pam believes education is the key to unlocking new opportunities and fulfilling her goals. "My God, what if I die and I have not accomplished my dreams?" Pam mentioned that it was not until she had a relationship with God that she prioritized herself. With a newfound sense of purpose, Pam sought assistance from a notable not-for-profit to begin exploring the academic landscape with tenacity. After 40 years of being out of the classroom, Pam enrolled in a pre-college program during the COVID-19 pandemic to assist with her developmental needs in mathematics. As the oldest in her cohort, Pam smiled softly as she reflected on earning the leadership award amongst her young peers. Pam is now enrolled full-time at a public community college, studying Criminal Justice.

Pam emphasizes the importance of honesty and genuine support from colleges in helping women with incarceration experience earn their degrees. She expresses that her most significant achievement since being released is understanding how powerful her voice is as a social justice advocate. Additional achievements include her determination to succeed and her willingness to support others. Pam's story is an inspiring testament to the power of resilience and the transformative potential of education, regardless of one's age or obstacles.

Jane, a 40-year-old white woman, describes feeling disoriented and overwhelmed by the "abundance of freedom" and resources available upon her release in 2021. Having participated in an in-prison education program, Jane earned an associate degree, demonstrating her commitment to self-improvement during her period of confinement. By maintaining contact with those who supported her in-prison education experience, Jane received additional support during her reintegration into the community.

Jane mentioned in her second interview, "Since I've been out, I've been trying to say yes to many things… to good opportunities, you know, things that might make me uncomfortable or could lead to further growth." One of the opportunities was a digital media fellowship program training men and women with lived experience. During this time, she reconnected with individuals affiliated

with the in-prison education program that offered her the motivation and financial support to continue her undergraduate degree.

Due to the financial commitments linked to her charges, Jane had postponed her educational aspirations as a long-term goal. However, she successfully transferred to a private institution sooner than she thought through the organization's support. In her

admissions essay, she shared the truth about her conviction history, and she was accepted and enrolled in their film program. With twenty-four credits remaining to earn her bachelor's in film, Jane is already planning her next steps. Jane recently purchased an LSAT study guide after befriending another woman with lived experience at her institution. Jane explains, "I never would've known or even thought about the idea of potentially going to law school or that I could go to law school. I mean, there are so many things that I ruled out reentering society that I handicapped myself."

Since returning, her most significant achievements have been completing her final project for her media design fellowship and being accepted to a private institution. These opportunities allow her to pursue her educational and career aspirations further. Jane's story highlights her tenacity and determination to pursue a new path beyond the shadows of her past.

Tricka is an African American 33-year-old mother of two, released in 2019. She describes her transition to her community as more of a "mental battle" than a physical one. Before her release, she transferred from a maximum- to medium-security prison. However, the limited support between the in-prison education programs and difficulty acquiring her college transcript deterred her from completing her associate degree at that time.

Once released, Tricka moved to the suburbs, reuniting with her family. She navigated the balance of motherhood and family obligations and began her academic pursuits that would allow her to excel both as a dedicated student and as a nurturing presence. To find this balance, Tricka needed to advocate for herself and seek support outside her suburban community despite the stipulations of her parole. With the additional

resources within the city, Tricka engaged in a reputable organization that offered educational, financial, and technical support to women with incarceration experience. This support enabled Tricka to complete her associate degree within one year and seamlessly pursue her bachelor's degree soon after.

Tricka is currently enrolled in an online master's in public administration program at a public university. She is grateful for her parole officer's understanding and acknowledgment of her choices. Tricka states, "When I invited her to an event, she would come. She would meet the people I said were impactful or influential to me." This shift in mindset humanized the parole process and contributed to a compassionate and rehabilitative approach toward Tricka's educational and professional success.

Since her release, Tricka mentions that her most significant achievement has been her position as a director of programs for a youth justice initiative that offers mentorship, education, and leadership opportunities for young people involved in the criminal justice system. She states how she utilizes her voice and "weaponizes her title" to advocate for detained youth when meeting with district attorneys and the mayor. Her full circle moment exemplifies the power of individuals who have been through the criminal justice system and how they can impact the lives of others, contributing to societal change.

Nasha, an African American 32-year-old woman, was released in 2018 and immediately entered a transition home. Filled with hope and determination to rebuild her life and be a mom to her now ten-year-old daughter, securing meaningful employment aligned with her aspirations was challenging. With several restrictions in transitional housing, Nasha states it felt like "another prison" and began working three jobs and renting hotel rooms to maintain a roof over her head.

Although Nasha has a large and supportive family, she explains, "People were comfortable with their lives and did not want to change that." She continues, "I still haven't touched the conversation with my mom too much about me living here with her." She firmly believes families affected by incarceration should participate in family functional therapy to improve communication skills and resolve complications related to their criminal/legal involvement.

Nasha had earned college credits from an institution before her incarceration and additional credits from an in-prison education program. However, she explains, "I do not know if I will graduate in two, three, four, or five years. What I know is that I want to graduate from school. I want to show my kids that school's important." With aspirations to eventually earn her license in social work, Nasha was recently accepted as a transfer student to a public institution with forty-eight credits, pursuing her bachelor's as a sociology major.

During our final interview, Nasha arrived wearing a military fatigue baseball cap with the term #SurvivingCitizen across the top in bold stitching. She was visibly overwhelmed and emotional. Concerned about her well-being, I paused the interview and offered her an opportunity to reschedule. However, Nasha was resilient, expressing her desire to continue. When discussing her achievement, she stated, "When your back is against the wall, you sometimes make decisions you regret. But returning to prison is not an option!" Besides being a mom to her now two children, she has additional achievements as an alumnus of a theater rehabilitation program. An avid singer and performer, Nasha states she has learned how to handle her emotions and improve her communication skills through this program. In addition, Nasha has facilitated courses and

productions that support individuals who have lived experience, allowing Nasha to give back to the community she once took from.

Liz, a 32-year-old white woman, spent over a year in prison, unsentenced, where twenty-three hours of her day was spent in a lock-down situation. She describes her transition experience as "fucking hellish" since the halfway house was drug-ridden, prostitution rampant, and in an area with limited public transportation. With a factory job she obtained, Liz did her best to make consistent criminal restitution payments to her victim, a condition of her probation. Feeling exhausted and having suicidal ideations, she recalls a conversation with her coworker, "I asked him if he knew where to get a gun because I was 90% committed to killing myself."

Liz's gratitude to God is evident in how she cherishes the blessings in the next chapter of her life. Her greatest blessing occurred at her probationary review, where she appeared with her pastor and sponsor, convinced she would be returned to prison. Unexpectedly, she was forgiven by her victim. Liz shares, "I am very, very grateful. But it also begs the question, do you think it would've been fair to send a 25-year-old back to prison to serve a seven-year sentence over something they did when they were 19 and on drugs?"

Her gratitude for a second chance is also extended to her "adopted" family, whom Liz worked for as a nanny. The family encouraged Liz to enroll in the local community college. "They would adjust their schedules so I could go to class." Liz also audited college courses through an initiative for those with criminal and legal involvement. Through this initiative, Liz applied and entered their general studies program, earning her bachelor's degree in English. Liz is currently on a partial scholarship in her first semester

of law school. Her unique perspective on criminal justice reform is rooted in her life experiences and fuels her commitment to initiate change.

Assenavi is a 43-year-old Latina who earned her associate and bachelor's degrees in sociology while incarcerated. She was prepared to enter society and make a meaningful contribution. However, navigating her transition to society at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic presented many challenges in accessing support services and resources. Assenavi explains that her husband showed her "in four days what I did not want to go through in life." Without any money or resources, she reached out to her family to help her secure shelter in a hotel so she could remove herself from the domestic violence situation and not violate her parole.

After some time, Assenavi moved to another state, closer to family, and secured employment at a large hardware store using her prison identification card. Despite her honesty, dedication, and competency, she was fired after spending a year with the company due to the nature of her crime. With her struggles maintaining employment, Assenavi enrolled in an online master's program for criminal justice. "I did not know how to use the internet or even navigate Microsoft Word or Excel. However, in September 2021, I decided to go at it again <laugh>. And I got my master's <laugh> finally. It took me three times to complete the first two weeks of schooling." Completing the program boosted Assenavi's self-esteem, and she believes colleges should be more understanding and accommodating to individuals with incarceration experience, taking into consideration their limited access to technology and potential learning disabilities. Assenavi is currently enrolled in the first semester of her doctoral program in criminal justice, where she has demonstrated perseverance, patience, and determination.

After experiencing domestic violence, spending months in a shelter, and moving from state to state, Assenavi finally feels grounded in her new home. She indicates that her biggest blessing is her community work with senior citizens with incarceration experience. As a community leader, her position has allowed her to share space with local and state politicians, earning her a Proclamation in January 2022. She states, "I love being in the same room with people who allow certain laws to affect us. I always thought they were above us, and they are not."

Jessy, a 25-year-old African American, is the youngest of the women interviewed. Jessy carries the weight of her past with fear of discrimination and stigma. Throughout the three interviews, Jessy never felt comfortable turning on her camera. She identifies herself as an African American mother whom friends have abandoned since her incarceration period. Once home, she remained isolated, stating, "I was always indoors crying. When I was first released, I could not eat well." She shares that her transition was lonely because she felt rejected and believed people did not want to be close to her. This led Jessy into severe depression, and since her release, it has been very challenging for Jessy to socialize with others.

Jessy explains that her mother and husband have impacted her transition the most. Through them, Jessy sought therapy and found the encouragement to enroll in college. Jessy is currently enrolled in a private university, studying Biology. She no longer attends therapy as she feels she can now cope with her emotions using mindfulness and other techniques as tools. Despite facing mental health challenges, Jessy refuses to seek academic support, believing she must navigate this college journey alone to avoid judgment and rejection. Jessy mentions not receiving support from the college, "I am not

able to seek assistance because I feel like if I try to seek, you will discriminate [against] me." She also claims not to need support from academic advisors or tutoring. Any assistance she seeks is online and private.

Jessy shares that her overall achievement since returning home was overcoming her mental health challenges and enrolling at the university. Jessy seems driven by independence and a desire to prove herself worthy on her terms.

Seliney is a 27-year-old African American woman who was released in 2021 to her family. She quickly isolated herself from her half-siblings, who she felt were "against" her and "terrorizing" her. She became withdrawn, grappling with her thoughts and emotions throughout this time. The stress took a physical toll on her, causing her to lose weight rapidly. As a former content creator on social media, she was very observant of her Body Mass Index (BMI), "My BMI dropped from 24 to 18 or something. I went from having a healthy weight to going underweight very quickly."

The criticism from people surrounding her caused her to have suicidal ideations. Seliney shared, "There was a time I was trying to commit suicide. I took an overdose of medication." Thankfully, her mother intervened and got her the medical assistance she needed. Seliney shares that she turned to her faith during this challenging time.

It was through the assistance of her beloved aunt, a staff member at the university she is currently attending, that she received support for her decision to enroll in school. Selieny's aunt supported her in completing her application to be a computer science major at this private university.

Although Seliney never felt comfortable turning on her camera for the interviews, Seliney shared that she found these interviews motivating and realized she has people who

value her and can show kindness. "I just need this kind of encouragement. Like someone to talk to me, someone I can explain what I'm facing, someone who can give me advice." Seliney attributes her success to her father and youngest sister, who have been highly supportive and encouraging through her transition home and to college. At this moment, Selieny's accomplishments involve putting her classroom knowledge into action by crafting a website to establish an online clothing and jewelry business.

Findings

The study participants freely shared their thoughts and feelings about their reintegration and college experiences. Their experiences provide deeper insights into the intersecting identities that influence a woman's journey post-incarceration. Reentry or transition occurs when a released individual must reintegrate and reacclimate to society. During their reintegration, individuals often face various challenges that they must overcome to prevent returning to custody. A way to categorize overarching themes that emerged from this study regarding a woman's reintegration to their community and college experiences post-incarceration include (a) Challenges and Triumphs Beyond Incarceration, (2) Breaking Barriers and Pursuing Degrees, and (3) Rise of the Phoenix: Empowering Women's Voices.

The first theme, Challenges and Triumphs Beyond Incarceration discusses the complex and varied needs of women reentering society. Services and policies must be inclusive and responsive to these women's diverse experiences and identities upon reentry. The second theme, Breaking Barriers and Pursuing Dreams, focuses on their educational journey and experiences within public and private universities. Finally, the third theme Rise of the Phoenix: Empowering Women's Voices, discusses the impact of community

support that fosters reintegration and empowers these women to become community leaders and contributing citizens.

Theme 1: Challenges and Triumphs Beyond Incarceration

Upon release, the women in this study were primarily concerned with securing safe housing or shelter to meet their most basic needs. This overarching theme provides insight into women's nuanced experiences navigating their transition into their community and includes (1) transitional housing/housing insecurities and (2) mental health challenges.

Sub-theme 1: Transitional Housing/Housing Insecurities

Moving from prison to transitional housing generally follows a structured process to help individuals reintegrate into society and build stable, productive lives. It should be a bridge that provides additional resources to reduce the risk of re-incarceration of women. However, most women found this to be the most challenging experience. Housing is a vital point for a successful reentry. Pam, who found refuge on a friend's couch after her release, shared that without stable housing, "you have nothing." Additional women recounted their experiences when they could not return to family or rely on a support network after their release.

Liz, who was unsentenced for a year at a maximum-security prison while overcoming a heroin addiction, describes how her mental health was impacted by the experience at the halfway house she was assigned to. She shares,

> I get to the halfway house and quickly realize everyone there is just selling their
> ass. I feel like it was obstacle number one. And I remember being like, I need to
> get out of here. It's weird when you're finally out and are thrilled to be out, or you

feel like you should be thrilled. But I also wanted to kill myself the most. I was

exhausted.

Although Liz did remove herself from the halfway house, she became involved in an

abusive relationship that offered housing with "some sort of security," further

complicating her path to recovery and stability.

In a similar experience, Nasha, a young mother, was released to a transitional

home in 2018 and describes this period as the "hardest part" of her experience. Nasha

shares that it was challenging to find "somewhere stable to live that was comfortable, that

didn't feel like I was in prison again." She went on to say,

I was mandated to do therapy at the transitional home…but it didn't help

me. And I feel like it didn't help me because, at the beginning, it was already high

stakes. I have to appease you. I have to follow whatever rules you tell me to follow

because I live here and you affect my housing. So I'm a little afraid I will lose my

housing if I do anything wrong.

In some instances, individuals in transitional housing may be required to participate in

mandated therapy sessions as part of their reintegration process. However, Nasha's worst

fears came true after being removed from the transitional home within several months.

This led her to reside in a hotel room, where she juggled three jobs to cover her expenses

as the option to live with family, was not available.

The COVID-19 pandemic, of course, exasperated challenges for women. Released

right before the global pandemic shutdown in March 2020, Assenavi vividly describes her

immediate experience after moving in with her husband. She shared,

I had to leave, especially when he was emotionally and psychologically abusing

me…it almost turned physical. And there was nowhere for me to go. So, I was

homeless because there were no shelters or anything because everything was

closed down due to COVID-19.

Fortunately, Assenavi had family that she could turn to, but moving across state lines can

present challenges related to parole violations. Therefore, Assenavi lived in various hotels

with her family's financial support, waiting for her parole to be transferred to another state,

where her family was anticipating her arrival to provide her with the safety and support

she needed.

Women across this study found it exceptionally challenging to find stable housing

post-incarceration. Jane shared, "Reentering society was harder than actually going in."

Fortunately, Jane utilized her in-prison education network and, unlike the other women,

had a positive experience securing temporary housing after feeling as if she had exhausted

her stay with a friend. Jane continued,

They [the organization] had a hotel in Brooklyn solely for people reentering the

community. I got it in about five hours. And I stayed there, you know, rent-free. It

was literally a hotel room. I had my own hotel room for six or seven months.

[Organization Name] ended up closing the hotel, so I had to leave. Well,

everybody did. These things are too good to be true, but it has made me feel loved

and supported, reentering the community.

The support Jane received was invaluable and essential to her successful journey. These

shared experiences demonstrate that the reintegration process can vary significantly

depending on available networks and support. Factors such as access to housing and

mental health support can significantly affect individuals transitioning from incarceration to community life successfully.

Sub-theme 2: Overcoming Mental Health Challenges

During the reentry period, several women described overcoming periods of isolation, stigma, and discrimination related to mental health conditions. Many women have experienced trauma before and during their incarceration, and the impact of trauma can be profound on women reentering society. Seliney, who returned to her family when released, was subjected to verbal insults and threats by her half-siblings and was constantly reminded of the actions that led her to be detained. As a result, Seliney shared that she isolated herself for several months,

> I just wanted to be alone…I was always indoors crying. It was really draining to me because I started talking to myself. I was having this kind of mental issue or something like that, and I started seeing things.

These experiences drove Seliney to attempt suicide by overdosing on medication. She was promptly taken to the hospital, where she remained in recovery for several weeks. After the incident, Seliney moved in with her biological father, and she found some reprieve by receiving the encouragement she desperately needed to continue moving forward.

During the transition period, women often encounter isolation, stigma, and rejection, further complicating the process of reintegrating into society. Jessy, the youngest of the women interviewed, isolated herself from the stigma and rejection she felt from friends during her release. She shares,

> After I was released, I went through a lot because my friends rejected me. No one was there for me. I was like, how could I cope with this kind of life? No more

friends. All the friends I had did not care for me. I was depressed. I couldn't go

outside. I couldn't go to any social gathering because of the depression.

Through the support of her mother, Jessy was introduced to a therapist who provided Jessy

with techniques to overcome her depressive episodes. Jessy, however, feels strongly about

keeping her history to herself to not be stigmatized and discriminated against further. "I

stopped telling people, and that has helped me."

During her plight, Pam, too, indicated that she sometimes "felt alone" because she

was constantly misunderstood. She shared,

I do not want to fight because I have a background I cannot do anything about. I

cannot do anything about what happened in the past."

Once Pam became involved with a local faith-based organization for women, she began

networking with those who had similar experiences. She further shares, "God has a way of

creating the networking atmosphere you need." Through this network, Pam found her

cheerleaders for the next phase of her transition.

Mental health challenges can further complicate one's transition with issues such as

trauma, substance abuse, and psychological distress, often necessitating comprehensive

support systems. This suggests that services should be trauma-informed and consider the

impact of trauma on the lives of women. Addressing mental health needs during the

reintegration process is needed to promote successful outcomes. This can involve

providing access to a supportive environment for healing to empower individuals and

build stable and fulfilling lives post-release.

Theme 2: Breaking Barriers and Pursuing Degrees

The navigation process of transitioning and enrolling in college as part of one's reintegration experience can become overwhelming. Although it may take some time for women to continue their education, each participant overcame several obstacles to enroll in college. The second theme, Breaking Barriers and Pursuing Degrees will disclose the shared experiences within higher education and one's ability to overcome barriers. The subthemes for this section include (a) in-prison education programs, (b) college experiences, and (c) motivations to attend college.

Sub-theme 1: In-prison education programs

Four women in this study reported that their in-prison education experiences provided valuable opportunities for learning, growth, and self-improvement. Although only two earned a college degree, these four women still acquired new skills, knowledge, and perspectives that empowered them to rebuild their lives post-incarceration.

Released in 2021, Jane reflected on her journey and attributes her success to connections made with the in-prison education network. She shares,

> [Name of In-Prison College Program] suggested the decision to enroll, and I don't know how I can possibly thank them for all they've done for me. I wouldn't have gotten my associate when I was away if it wasn't for them. I wouldn't be in the trajectory that I'm in right now if I hadn't gone away to prison, and I wouldn't be in school now if it weren't for them.

Jane's educational journey extends beyond her experience in prison. With the agency's help, Jane transferred her associate degree to a private institution soon after her release to pursue a career in film. She further shares,

That was like a wild dream of mine, when I was away. Like if I was just

daydreaming, I thought, maybe I could graduate from [Name of College]. And I

didn't even think it was an option or that I could even get in.

With the financial commitments connected to Jane's charges, the thought of earning her

bachelor's degree was postponed. However, through the educational agency's constant

communication and financial support, Jane has been fortunate to continue her

undergraduate studies at a private institution with a scholarship for women with in-prison

education experience. However, these supports are not available to everyone.

Nasha's reason for participating in the in-prison program was to "keep my sanity

and keep me mentally in check. Because I was used to going to school when I was home."

Nasha wanted to create "normalcy" in her life while incarcerated. She further shared,

I was excited to go to college because I could still do things I used to, like doing

my homework, interacting with my professors, and reading books. I was happy

that I was still able to do that while I was locked away. I could only take a class a

semester or something like that. And, of course, it takes you a long time to obtain a

degree, but I accumulated 46 or 50 credits while I was in prison.

Unlike Jane, Nasha was not able to complete her degree while detained. Upon her release,

she participated in educational support programs, enrolling in a public institution and

quickly withdrawing when told attending school in the evening would violate the rules of

the transition home she resided in for a brief period. Despite these challenges, Nasha took

her time and managed to secure stable housing, rebuild her family, and obtain employment

before deciding to reenroll in college for the third time.

In prison, college education programs allow participants to acquire valuable skills that empower them to navigate personal growth and academic achievement within correctional facilities. Assenavi discusses her experiences with an inside-out approach that assisted her in visualizing her education outside of her in-prison educational experience. Assenavi goes on to share,

> Students from the outside were coming into[Name of Prison], so it was integrated. You would have incarcerated individuals in the class as well as regular civilians who were taking the same course on the outside. And that was fun and interesting. It expanded my mindset.

Assenavi further connects that experience to her background and shares,

> My first language was Spanish. I come from a childhood life of sexual abuse. I've come from a criminal background, and I still, no matter what, I can get my doctorate, and that's saying a lot. And it's not about me making six figures; I don't care about that. What I care about is the title. Because when you die, no one can take that from you. I don't care if you get arrested a hundred times after that. I'm getting my doctorate because I want to be called Dr. [Name Redacted] I want people to recognize where I come from.

> Unlike Assenavi's continuous experience, an interruption in prison education can occur due to transferring facilities, disrupting educational learning. Tricka's in-prison education experience was interrupted when she transferred from a maximum to medium-security facility. However, Tricka was unprepared for this transition. She shares,

> It's not like there's someone that's like, Hey, um, get these documents ready because you're gonna be, potentially, transferring into a college here, right? So,

because there are some college initiatives inside.

Without the guidance, Tricka became frustrated. She continued,

So, the reason I didn't finish my education in prison or finish a degree in prison

was in between those college experiences, I got into fighting, I got locked up, and I

got into issues with officers. So, that took away from being able to complete an

associate degree.

Tricka's experience illustrates how the culture and support within the maximum-security prison fostered a positive environment for higher education. However, upon her transfer to the medium-security prison, Tricka found herself navigating her educational journey largely on her own. The literature has overlooked the transfer experiences of individuals moving between facilities. Without sufficient planning and considering the timing of these transfers, students who want to continue their education may miss out on earning credits and become frustrated with the continuation of their educational journey, as was the case with Tricka.

Sub-theme 2: College Experiences Post-incarceration

All participants in this study have college experience post-incarceration. For many, these experiences have been positive, and the participants have found an institution that is welcoming and supportive to individuals with system involvement. Jane shares her positive experience transferring from an in-prison education program with an associate degree to a private university setting. Jane completed a transfer application and, in her essay, was honest about her incarceration experience. She shared, "The fact that they

loved my story enough to give me a chance to pursue my higher education, I think that's awesome." Jane once daydreamed about attending this institution during her confinement, and her dream became a reality. Jane continued,

> It's really nice to have a program where you're amongst peers who have not necessarily come from similar backgrounds to you but are around the same age, didn't go straight into college after high school, or maybe have endured some sort of life-altering experience. And now they're working on picking up the pieces, moving on, and having a chance that maybe they didn't have years ago. So, I feel safer and more confident at [Name of College] only because I'm amongst other people my age.

Jane revels in her newfound freedom and finds relief in feeling comfortable and safe at her new institution, recognizing that feeling secure is important to her journey of growth and empowerment. Safety, post-incarceration matters because it creates a supportive environment where women can thrive emotionally, intellectually, and socially. As such, Jane is able to embrace the opportunities ahead with confidence.

For others, determination and grit can often lead to excellence. After a disruption in her in-prison education experience, moving from a maximum to medium-security prison, Tricka returned home and was determined to return to school to complete her degree. When recounting her experience transferring from her in-prison education program to an urban community college, she struggled to understand how her credits transferred to different academic programs. However, she made sure to advocate for herself. She shares,

I think [Name of college] encouraged me and impacted my college experience. They were just so flexible with class advisors so that you could reach anyone via chat or email, in person, or over the phone. Even if you were having difficulties, I remember when my credits had transferred over, they did not account for one of my math classes, and I had to go to the math department to fight for the credit. And it wasn't like a hassle. It was just like, send over the syllabus so I can see what classes you took and make sure that it matches our standards. It was just such a seamless process.

This experience allowed Tricka to continue on her path to earning her associate and bachelor's degrees within three years of her release. Her self-advocacy empowered Tricka to articulate her needs and goals while seeking support and resources to facilitate a successful experience.

While Jane and Tricka can cherish the positive experiences of transitioning successfully from an in-prison education program to a college post-release, others recount a starkly contrasting negative encounter. Upon her release, Nasha had an opportunity to participate in a college-audited class experience with others who had lived the experience. She shares,

The professor reached out to me and was really nasty. And I was surprised by that because of the culture and the way I've been introduced to [Name of College]; it just didn't strike me as nasty. And that's basically what I received. The professor told me, "I don't know how you got into this class. I don't even know why you're in my class. You are not a traditional student, so I'm taking you off the roster."

After that encounter, Nasha struggled to understand her professor's comment, saying she was "not a traditional student" and was instantly discouraged. The language used by professors can profoundly impact students in various ways, influencing their motivation and overall academic success. As a mother who was now balancing the responsibilities of home, work, and school, this encounter made Nasha reflect on her reintegration experience and she shared,

> I wish I would've had someone hold my hand a little bit…I don't wanna say it in a way where it's like, oh, you needed so much help and no, it's not even really that, it's just, I really kind of needed guidance. I wish somebody would've just said, hey, look, listen, this is what you need to do right now. Get a bank account, get your own place, get a job. Go to school or get into school. Live on campus and graduate and get a scholarship or something. I don't know. I just feel like I needed more support, and I wish somebody had told me more and helped me out. And that's just what I feel.

Nasha required guidance to learn how to balance her newfound freedom with the responsibilities of parenting, working, and attending school. Her desire to reenroll is evident. However, she struggled with navigating the process alone, delaying the opportunity to earn her degree.

Like Nasha, Jessy also encountered challenges during her college experience at the private university. She shared,

> I felt like they kind of discriminated against me when I first started college. I was able to tell people about it, and I noticed that anytime I told people about it, they were kind and started giving me an attitude. They would not come close to me and

then would sort of say things like the kind of crime I could commit to land me in jail and do everything. So, I was feeling so bad, and I decided not to be exposed to people except people who are very close to me.

Experiencing discrimination due to one's former incarceration while attending college can be profoundly disheartening, as it involves facing stigma and bias based on past mistakes. This further undermines the individual's efforts to pursue education and rebuild their life. As a result, Jessy refuses to seek any support on the college campus. However, despite the lingering fear of stigma and discrimination, Jessy is not allowing these feelings to dictate her future. Jessy, in turn, seeks support only from her husband and immediate family as she continues on her educational journey and practices the mindfulness tools taught to her by her therapist.

Pam, who was actively involved in the community, was motivated by her friends and mentor. After 40 years of being outside the classroom, Pam found the courage to reenroll in school during the COVID-19 pandemic. After completing a pre-college program with a leadership award, Pam applied for a student opportunity program offering additional supportive services to earn her associate degree. Pam shares,

I was honest. I had to write an essay, and I'm in the [College Opportunity Program] program. I only got in here because of the essay because I'm not supposed to be in it. I'm eligible for the income, but not because I've been to school before, and they accepted my credits. So, it wasn't like I was lying because it's on my transcript. And they told me, 'Pam, we think you would be an asset,' and that was great to hear.

Pam excelling with her online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic allows her to attend this community college as a hybrid student, balancing in-person and online classes to compensate for her ailments. In addition, the support and personal validation from the college program has fueled Pam's determination. She went on to share,

> I quit my job and everything for school because I do not need to be distracted. I can't get distracted. I am getting this degree!

Pam is determined to move forward and earn her associate degree in criminal justice. However, Pam must attend full-time to maintain the financial and academic benefits and personal support connected to this supportive program at the community college she is currently attending.

Like Pam, Seliney's college aided her transition to college after her incarceration. With the assistance of her aunt, a college staff member, Seliney also applied for and received a partial scholarship for her first semester.

> I was also applying for scholarships, which I got. I got a partial scholarship and encouragement from my community, even the advisors. So yeah, I got material things for college to help pay for textbooks and stuff like that.

Seliney further shared that she enjoyed the experience of being in school and keeping her mind occupied. She continues to apply what she is learning as a part-time computer science student to begin an online business.

Public and private colleges offer many benefits that empower economically marginalized students to pursue and succeed in higher education. Through many of these shared experiences, we learned that some of the women who sought support received financial assistance through scholarships and grants, academic support services, pre-

college preparation, and personalized support. These supports are crucial in increasing persistence and retention rates while promoting social mobility. When academic or social-emotional support was lacking or not well received by participants, like Jessy and Nasha, they faced challenges at the outset of their educational journey.

Sub-theme 3: Motivation to attend college

The women in this study emphasized that college was not merely about attaining a degree but symbolized a profound commitment to their personal growth, redemption, and pursuing a brighter future. Some indicated that motivation to enroll in college came from other people, such as family members, their involvement with their work, and using their education for positive change within themselves and their communities. Pam shares,

> My whole reason for returning to school is my involvement in social justice. I want to sit at the table and not be on the outskirts of it. That's important.

> Tricka shares a similar explanation for continuing her undergraduate degree upon

her release. She explains,

> For me, education is the key to getting into those spaces where you can contribute to change and a better society. I just feel like I've learned so much about life and the vitality of it. So, I feel like there's no way that I can be on this earth and not, like, try to make it better for me and the people that's around me. I'm on that journey to figuring out how to really impact and influence a large majority of people.

Both Pam and Tricka are motivated by their deeper understanding of societal issues, which enables them to use their experience to address challenges and become advocates for positive change. Whether through research, activism, entrepreneurship, or leadership

roles, these women can significantly impact society on a larger scale. They can now leverage their education and experiences to become influential voices and agents of change within their communities, ultimately fostering a brighter future for all.

Seliney attributes the support of her father as the primary motivation to enroll in college. She shares the following about what will keep her motivated,

> I think an opportunity to also talk to people and to get advice from people. Like someone who will always, you know, advise me, encourage me, and make me feel good. Also, tell me that the past is the past, and I should just let go of those thoughts. Sometimes you just feel like you're very tired. Like everything is just not going fine. So I think talking to someone like this will keep me motivated.

Selieny's sentiment illustrates the need for mentorship and emotional support in navigating the challenges of reintegration. The desire for someone who provides not only advice and encouragement but also reassurance and perspective reflects a deep need for connection and guidance during difficult times. This commentary emphasizes the invaluable role of supportive relationships in fostering resilience and motivation and the power of human connection in the journey towards healing and growth with their newfound freedom.

Jane's motivation includes doing something positive with her newfound freedom. She shares,

> My world was so much bigger than I had thought when I was in prison. I thought I'm gonna have a felony conviction for the rest of my life and I just thought my life was over in so many ways. But I really haven't done anything different so far. And since film is one of my passions, I would love to give back and raise awareness

about the flaws of the correction system. I met so many women while I was away

that were repeat offenders because of their drug addiction. And the recidivism that

exists is just incredible…I would love to raise awareness about that.

The motivations to enroll and succeed in college are personal to each woman in

this study. For many, this is an opportunity for career advancement and to build a better

future for themselves and their families. For others, it can be for personal growth and

redemption. No matter the motivation, engaging in higher education post-release can build

their self-esteem and self-worth after experiencing the challenges and stigma related to

their incarceration experience.

Theme 3: Rise of the Phoenix: Empowering Women's Voices

During reintegration, many community agencies play a vital role in empowering

men and women with criminal and legal involvement. During the interviews, the women

shared their experiences with several organizations that support individuals with system

involvement. In several testimonies, these women sought support from the same

community agencies offering transitional services and educational support, including pre-

college programming for developmental needs. These supportive services and resources

helped them overcome obstacles and build resilience to create a positive change in their

lives and their communities. These agencies provide vital support through counseling, job

training, housing assistance, and educational programs, equipping individuals with the

necessary tools to reintegrate effectively into society. Moreover, they serve as crucial

advocates, promoting understanding within the broader community. Through their holistic

approach to rehabilitation, these agencies not only address the immediate needs of these

women but also foster long-term transformation, ultimately contributing to safer and more

inclusive communities. The subthemes include (1) community agency experiences, (2) leadership and advocacy, and finally (3) mentoring.

Sub-theme 1: Community Agency Experiences

Six of the women in this study actively sought community support once released. Through education, professional development, health and wellness, leadership development, and mentorship opportunities, the women in this study had opportunities to participate in positive spaces. These opportunities allowed the women to create positive change within themselves and their communities. A common theme was the educational support programs that provided access and support.

Pam and Tricka actively participated in a free program to assist first-generation and system-impacted students in pursuing their academic endeavors. The program also provides mentorship to new students. Tricka appreciated receiving lunch and travel vouchers for participants in need when she was commuting from the suburbs to earn her degree. She shared, "If you needed food, clothes, or were in a crisis, there was usually someone there to support you." Pam, who experienced the program during COVID-19, also felt supported. She shared, "When I started at [Name of College Program], I was scared. I was the oldest in the class. I was older than the teachers. And I'm like, I haven't been to school in, I dunno how long. I can't do this." However, she excelled with the program's assistance, passing her finals with ample support.

Nasha and Liz often referenced their experiences with art and theater programs that were instrumental to them. Nasha had an opportunity "with a group of women who came together to tell their stories about things that happened to them in prison. And we put on a

short film, and I was the facilitator of this class." This opportunity allowed Nasha to make additional connections to educational and theater programs throughout the city.

Liz shares the importance of gender-specific programs in providing a sense of support and community for women facing challenges during their transition, particularly in traditionally male-dominated environments. Her participation in a women-only theater program demonstrates the value of such initiatives in nurturing a safe and inclusive environment for women to connect, share experiences, and empower one another. Nonetheless, Liz's challenge in maintaining consistency due to logistical barriers highlights the limitations of these programs concerning accessibility and resources.

By participating in safe and supportive environments, women can feel comfortable expressing themselves and sharing their experiences without fearing judgment or discrimination. These women take pride in their identity, and by providing safe spaces where women can network and be provided opportunities for personal and professional growth, women can continue to thrive.

Sub-theme 2: Advocacy

Despite facing challenges and barriers during their reintegration, participants discuss their determination to achieve their dreams and have shown remarkable dedication. Participants in this study overwhelmingly shared that their experience has given them a strong desire to enter fields where they can give back to the community. As advocates, the careers and experiences these women seek are primarily geared toward helping others.

Assenavi currently works for an agency that conducts outreach to the elderly population with criminal and legal involvement. Additionally, based on her own

experiences with homelessness, Assenavi also started her non-profit, providing furniture to those in need. By collecting unwanted furniture and delivering items to "communities of concern," Assenavi has furnished over 300 homes in the last year. She shares,

> When you move into an apartment, you don't have anything. You don't have a bed to sleep in. No one's giving you anything. They make promises that [City Agency] is gonna give you a voucher for furniture. And everyone we spoke to, people were waiting four or five years just for furniture, just for a mattress.

Assenavi's work and commentary highlight the realities faced by many individuals who are particularly relying on support from social services. It demonstrates the challenges of securing basic necessities and exposes the shortcomings of existing support systems. This commentary sheds light on the urgent need for improved access to housing and emphasizes the importance and effective assistance from existing support systems.

> Tricka, through her lived experience, also wants to create better communities. She shares,

> I would love to create better communities, like better systems. I know that I don't want to do direct service work because I feel like, to be most impactful, we have to change policy and invest largely. And I think to do that, I would like to probably be a comptroller for the mayor's office. You know, we're going to budget to do what money is advocated.

Women reintegrating into the community are taking on active roles and advocating for themselves and the community at large. As Jane reflects on her transition, she shares,

> I don't know how to describe the generosity and the assistance I've had coming back into society. Like I was so hell-bent on doing everything alone, I don't need

anybody's help. I got myself into this mess. I can get myself out of it. But these are programs for a reason, so why not take advantage of them? And I think there is some humility that I had to learn in that and asking for help. Because I need help, I cannot do this alone.

Liz goes on to share that, had it not been for the connections she made through the organization linked to her in-prison education program it would have taken her more time to return and complete her degree. Jane shares, "At some point, I did wanna go back, but it just wasn't in my immediate plan with everything going on." By maintaining contact with those instrumental in her experiences inside, Jane remained connected and received the appropriate support transferring to a private institution.

For others, that transition had challenging moments. Although Nasha participated in a few organizations during her reintegration period, she struggled to enroll in college. Nasha shares one experience,

> I tried to fill out the application, but I kept getting stuck. So, I started feeling discouraged. I'm working all these jobs. I still have to pay for my cell phone bill. I have to survive. And I can't afford this application fee, so I can't. I was so embarrassed to tell them, like, yeah, I cannot afford this application, to go to school, so I'm just not gonna do it. So, I just never went back to him.

With limited technology skills and an inability to afford the college application fee, Nasha gave up. Failing to seek assistance or ask questions about available support hindered Nasha from progressing and enrolling at the university she had always dreamed of attending. This struggle may also have contributed to her negative experience discussed earlier regarding and interaction with her professor in the audited course she participated

in. Therefore, even at the application stage, colleges must offer support and encouragement for women with experience to complete the application successfully, as many individuals with limited technological skills and financial resources will shy away from opportunities.

Sub-theme 3: Mentoring

Mentoring one another was shared amongst the women who wanted to be there for others as a means of support. This occurred in professional settings, such as within organizations with participants and administrators and with women with lived experience. Liz shares her experience with one of her peers as follows,

This girl, Cloé who was taking classes and was formerly locked up, came to [Name of program redacted], and I used to meet her outside. Our classes would end simultaneously, and we would walk to the train station together. Our 20-minute walks together were like everything. There was that small period where there was this little group of us, and it was just like those check-ins mattered. It was just like the community, and it was a bright spot.

By sharing experiences and concerns in a safe and non-judgmental space, Liz and her group can gain perspective and receive validation through this emotional support. These "check-ins" not only strengthen bonds between peers but also contribute to one's mental well-being by reducing the fear of isolation. Jane also has found comfort in sharing resources and supporting another woman who was at the same facility. She states,

A woman who I met while I was away, just got out in May, and it's been helpful for me to talk to her about what happened, and kind of since I'm like a year and a half ahead of her in terms of reentering society, it's been helpful for me to teach

what little I know her and like validate her because I think that part of my healing

is giving back a little bit.

Participating in community organizations or in spaces where women with lived

experience can meet privately, can offer many benefits. The experiences of the women in

the study reveal a profound journey of resilience and empowerment. Through these

opportunities, the women make meaningful differences in the lives of others and continue

to contribute to the well-being of their communities. By helping others navigate difficult

circumstances that they have also experienced, they contributed to their peers' well-being

and fostered a profound sense of self-worth and esteem within themselves. This process of

mutual aid and solidarity enabled them to reclaim agency over their narratives, fostering a

newfound sense of identity and empowerment.

Conclusion

This study explored the lived and shared experiences of formerly incarcerated

women. This chapter identified the most common themes among participants regarding

their reintegration into their community and their college experiences post-incarceration.

The findings conveyed three overarching themes that emerged through semi-structured

interviews with eight participants. The following chapter will further discuss the findings

and conclusions and offer recommendations for future research studies.

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

The primary goal of this qualitative study was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the transitional journey of eight (N=8) formerly incarcerated women, their reintegration into the community, and their college experiences. This chapter will synthesize the findings and connect them to existing literature, address the research questions, and discuss findings under Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994) as well as Nancy Schlossberg's (1989) Theory of Marginality and Mattering theoretical frameworks. This chapter will conclude with practical implications for future research and implications for institutional and community practices. This chapter seeks to enrich the existing literature by delving into the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated women as they navigate college life post-incarceration. Through a deeper understanding of these experiences, this study aims to strengthen academic programming and foster stronger connections between community programs and universities for women reintegrating post-incarceration.

Discussion of Findings

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are the experiences of women transitioning into society after incarceration, including participation in post-secondary education?

RQ 2: How do women engage and interact with support within their surrounding community, including the college environment?

RQ 3: How do women identify success post-incarceration?

Three main themes served as findings for this study:

1. Challenges and triumphs beyond incarceration

2. Breaking barriers and pursuing degrees

3. Rise of the phoenix: Empowering women's voices

In the following section, the researcher will connect these themes to the previous literature, answer the research questions, and connect the findings to both Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994) as well as Nancy Schlossberg's (1989) Theory of Marginality and Mattering theoretical frameworks that guided this study.

Connection to Previous Literature

As discussed in Chapter 2, the researcher identified a diverse set of qualitative and quantitative articles that supported prior literature and the identified gap in the research. Therefore, the researcher will discuss each theme in this section and highlight the alignment or lack thereof with previous literature.

Challenges and Triumphs Beyond Incarceration

Reentry is described as a "gendered phenomenon," with women's post-release experiences differing significantly from those of men (Cobbina, 2010, p. 211). One of the significant challenges for transitioning women remains finding stable and affordable housing. Therefore, those with experience are more likely than those without incarceration experience to be homeless with African Americans experiencing homelessness at higher rates than others (Couloute, 2018; Scroggins & Mally, 2010). Additional challenges women face during reentry include gaining employment while completing mandated programs, and reconnecting with their families (Mijs, 2016).

As women navigate their new freedom, many reintegrate without family or a supportive network, as was the case for five women in this study. In addition, these

challenges include the fear of being stigmatized and discriminated against because having

a felony conviction can be demoralizing and discouraging and contributes to additional

isolation from society (Arditti, 2005; Gunnison, et al., 2015; Willging et al., 2015).

Several of the women in this study discussed periods of isolation, as well as overcoming

mental health challenges, including suicidal ideations. The COVID-19 global pandemic

also exacerbated these experiences for some women. The literature also discussed the need

for women to overcome past traumas and histories of drug addiction, as was the case for

several of the research participants, and can contribute to the recidivism rate of women

(Rowell-Cunsolo et al., 2016).

Although three women were able to move in with family after their release from

incarceration, they encountered various familial and situational challenges. Reintegrating

into their homes and navigating the delicate balance between newfound freedom and

fulfilling familial roles while meeting family expectations proved overwhelming. The

remaining five women faced housing insecurities, leading them to live with friends, reside

in transitional housing, or move between hotels in their post-incarceration journey which,

additionally, challenged their mental health.

Breaking Barriers and Pursuing Degrees

Despite facing challenges in reintegrating into the community, the women in the

study have diverse educational backgrounds. It is important to note that college students

with criminal records constitute a protected, underrepresented, and marginalized student

population (McTier et al., 2017). Although there is extensive research on the effectiveness

of in-prison college programs in reducing recidivism rates (Hui Kim & Clark, 2013), there

is limited research on students' experiences with college post-incarceration (Halkovic &

Greene, 2015). Four women engaged in college educational programs while incarcerated, with two earning a degree. However, with the in-prison education experience, there is a decreased likelihood of recidivism compared to women who did not participate in such programs. In addition, all women (N=8) participated in college classes at various public and private institutions within an urban area as part of their reintegration.

This study sought to identify the experiences of undergraduate students. However, the study also included three women who were participating in post-undergraduate studies. Tricka is currently enrolled as a graduate student studying public administration; Liz is in her first semester of law school; and Assenavi, who earned her associate and bachelor's in sociology while incarcerated, earned an online master's degree upon her release and has recently started her doctoral degree in criminal justice. Women with incarceration experience working on their master's and doctoral degrees demonstrate resilience, determination, and academic excellence.

Finally, according to Halkovic & Greene (2015), private and state colleges commonly ask questions about an individual's criminal history on the college application, which can further deter applicants. This is a structural barrier to higher education (Halkovic & Greene, 2015). However, five of the women participating in this study attend private universities, while three attend a public university, which does not coincide with the literature. In addition, the women attending both public and private universities have discussed feeling welcomed and supported as students. Despite encountering negative experiences at their respective private institutions, both Nasha and Jessy have persevered in their educational pursuits. While Jessy has chosen to work in private, Nasha has found an institution that not only accepts her credits but also provides a supportive environment

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close to home. Their shared determination to earn a degree emphasizes their commitment to persist and move forward with their academic endeavors.

Rise of the Phoenix: Empowering Women's Voices

Limited access to resources was a recurring theme in the literature, and access to supportive programs was a stated challenge for women released from prison (Kellet & Willing, 2011). However, community involvement offers individuals valuable opportunities. Participating in supportive community organizations provides leadership and activism and empowers women to enact positive change for themselves and within their communities. Several participants shared their experiences as community activists and serving as a voice for people within their immediate communities. Through their involvement in leadership roles, these women can continue to inspire others, challenge stereotypes, and play a significant role in shaping a more equitable society.

Access to mental health therapy, 12-step programs, and educational and professional opportunities were available for these women who sought it. In addition, those active in their reintegration discussed opportunities to advocate for themselves and support others with lived experience as a way to "give back" to the community they once took from.

The college community is also a resource for students, including those with incarceration experience, where individuals can thrive academically, personally, and professionally. In addition, college programs foster a supportive and inclusive environment where students can connect with peers, faculty, and staff who can understand and respect their experiences. College programs are crucial in empowering students to

achieve their goals and fulfill their potential regardless of their background or past experiences.

Connection of Findings to the Research Questions

The findings of this study are closely connected to the research questions. Research question one explores the diverse experiences of women reintegrating into their community and through college post-incarceration. Upon their reintegration, the participants discussed themes that provided insight into their diverse experiences, emphasizing the numerous obstacles they confronted, including housing insecurity, mental health, and societal stigma. Despite these challenges, they exhibited remarkable resilience in adapting and overcoming adversity.

The second research question focused on how women interact with support in their community and a college setting. Consistently, the findings highlighted how positive experiences and connections empower these women throughout their journey. They emphasized the importance of women navigating suitable support systems tailored to their needs. These networks facilitate connections and provide access to mentors and additional positive networks that have allowed these women to progress. These positive experiences have included financial support for housing, as well as scholarships and grants to continue their educational pursuits.

The data analysis found that most participants utilized networks within the community; however, the two younger participants, Jessy and Selieny, did not. The fear of the societal stigma has kept them with limited access to diverse forms of assistance, relying solely on familial support. Without a holistic, broader support network, Jessy and

Selieny may lack exposure to new ideas, perspectives, and empowerment opportunities essential for personal growth and self-discovery.

The data analysis also highlighted themes related to the participants' undergraduate experiences. Half of the women were enrolled in college education programs while incarcerated, with only one earning a bachelor's degree before her release. The other three participants explored transfer opportunities and engaged in ongoing support as they continued their educational journeys in private and public universities.

The data analysis also emphasized positive experiences at institutions that have been welcoming and supportive, demonstrating campus environments that foster a sense of belonging for all students regardless of their background. The flexibility of online options has also allowed women to manage their education with competing priorities. In addition, those who shared their history in college essays or in accessing support were provided with encouragement, guidance, and additional resources.

Motivation was an additional theme that highlighted the college experiences of the participants in this study. For some, it represents a chance to progress in their careers and create a brighter future for themselves and their families. For others, it is an opportunity for personal development and a path to redemption. Regardless of their motivations, pursuing higher education after release has contributed to enhancing their self-esteem and self-worth following the challenges and trauma affiliated with incarceration. Moreover, active participation and engagement in both the community and within the college settings have highlighted their aspiration to pursue careers where they can contribute meaningfully to their immediate communities and society at large.

The third research question is how women identify success post-incarceration; the theme *Rise of the Phoenix: Empowering Women's Voices* demonstrates how women derived strength from their lived experiences, demonstrating reliance in their pursuit of a better life. By taking on active roles and advocating for themselves and the community, the women have found value in utilizing their voices and lived experiences to validate and mentor women through their reintegration experiences. These themes provide a comprehensive insight into the intricate dynamics influencing the experiences and perspectives of formerly incarcerated women within the community.

Connection of Findings to Theoretical Frameworks

The findings of this study are closely aligned with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theoretical framework (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1977) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the multifaceted challenges faced by individuals beyond incarceration. Considering the interactions between individuals and their diverse environments, this demonstrates the importance of addressing challenges in multiple systems. The theme of *Challenges and Triumphs Beyond Incarceration* aligns in context with the ecological systems theory.

The *microsystem* refers to the immediate environment in which the individual interacts daily. This includes familial networks, peer relationships, community programming events, and the classroom, dealing with instructors, and interacting with peers (Ozaki et al., 2020). However, successfully navigating the microsystem could require rebuilding relationships with family and friends and accessing resources.

The second theme of *Breaking Barriers and Pursuing Degrees* connects directly to the *mesosystem,* which includes interactions between different microsystems, including educational institutions, social services, and additional programs. In an inclusive atmosphere, students can advance with their peers as they simultaneously move through various microsystems. This area is formed or widened each time the individual enters a new setting and diminishes when they remove themselves from a particular setting (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017). As each woman reintegrates into their community and again as they reintegrate into college, they take on a new role, widening or diminishing the area. However, effective communication and collaboration are pivotal in navigating these interconnected themes.

Finally, the theme of *Rise of the Phoenix, Empowering Women's Voices*, is directly connected to the *exosystem*, which includes the external environments that influence individual development. In this sphere, overcoming challenges can involve advocating for policy changes and overcoming stigma and discrimination by accessing supportive and inclusive services (Farineau, 2016). The *macrosystem* encompasses broader cultural and societal norms, values, and ideologies (Farineau, 2016). At this stage, women are actively involved in challenging systemic inequalities and injustices while promoting awareness of women's experiences and lived experiences within society. Finally, the *chronosystem* reflects the influence of time through change or consistency for their individuals. These experiences can be normative when they are expected, such as when enrolling in college, or nonnormative when the occurrence is unexpected (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). In this sphere, events can change the person's interaction within their surroundings, resulting in developmental change (Bronfenbrenner, 1989).

This study's findings also align with Nancy Schlossberg's (1989) Theory of Marginality and Mattering theoretical framework. Schlossberg (1989) emphasizes the significance of evaluating the notions of marginality and mattering when examining the impact of the college experience on student development. Marginality and mattering (Schlossberg et al., 1989) sit on a spectrum where the two terms are on opposite axes. Marginality arises when people take on a new role, such as becoming a college student and feeling unsure about it. This feeling leads one to believe they do not matter and question their belonging and membership. On the contrary, mattering is the feeling that an individual is a significant contributor and is valued.

The participants in this study who have transitioned into their community seeking and receiving support from community agencies, faith-based communities, and colleges have placed themselves in supportive and inclusive environments that nurture the women's well-being and resilience. As a result, these women have moved through the other ecological systems more freely through this support. I strongly believe that mattering within the exosystem, mesosystem, and microsystem allows women to be recognized and acknowledged for their contributions and experiences within these larger social spheres, further promoting a sense of agency and empowerment.

On the contrary, women who transition into their communities and are marginalized due to stigma and discrimination within their microsystem, which includes proximal relationships with family, friends, and peers, can have profound and lasting impacts on an individual's well-being and sense of self-worth. Therefore, the impact of stigma and discrimination within the microsystem encompasses their immediate social settings including family. Neighbors and peer groups can lead to a sense of alienation and

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disconnection. Those who have had challenges seem to stay within those confined environments as we found with the two young participants of the study.

Balancing stigma and safety concerns is another delicate yet crucial aspect of the college experience for women with incarceration experience. While earning a degree in higher education offers a path to personal growth and economic stability for these women, they must also confront the daunting prospect of navigating an environment where their past encounters with the criminal justice system may lead to prejudice or discrimination, which can further delay healing. Safety concerns can arise from potential interactions with peers or faculty who may hold biases or harbor misconceptions about one's background. Therefore, institutions of higher education must proactively address these challenges by training new faculty and staff in using appropriate language. Academic Advisors can also direct participants to comprehensive support services, including peer mentoring programs, leadership opportunities as well as counseling resources. By building inclusive policies and practices that foster a supportive campus climate for formerly incarcerated women striving to build a brighter future through education additional women with incarceration experience can continue earning their college credentials.

Implications for Future Research

The findings suggest that there are opportunities to extend the research on the experiences of formerly incarcerated women and their transition to the community and through college experiences. Future research should seek a longitudinal study to explore long-term outcomes of formerly incarcerated women once released. Studying the women through an extended period would provide a better understanding of the factors contributing to successful reintegration. By examining how multiple dimensions of

identity (race, gender, ethnicity, family responsibility, educational attainment, etc.) intersect with the experiences of the reintegration period, the researcher can gain a deeper understanding of the unique challenges and barriers these subgroups face within this population.

Addressing these intersectional challenges can help us develop comprehensive solutions involving policy changes, community support, and institutional reforms. Adopting a gender-responsive approach that considers the unique challenges of formerly incarcerated women during their academic pursuits should also be considered. In addition to programmatic assistance, campus leadership, and mentorship positions should be researched and compared.

A study on the active collaboration between educational institutions and community agencies should be explored to identify best practices. Researching involved partnerships and their support can improve access to higher education and enhance outcomes for formerly incarcerated students striving to complete their degrees if the colleges do not have the funding for a reintegration program on their campus. Finally, with the increase of in-prison college education programs, the transferring of individuals and their college credits should be examined further as transferring from maximum to medium security prisons and colleges during the reentry period has resulted in the loss of credits, delaying women from earning their college degree both within the community and when transitioning between in-prison college education programs.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study have highlighted the need for community organizations and colleges to work together to support this population and develop transformative practices to support and celebrate the success of these women in their communities. In addition to offering a welcoming and supportive environment for individuals transitioning to college after a period of incarceration, administrators should consider expanding leadership and mentorship programs. By providing a small stipend, transitioning women can fully engage with campus life while also offering support to others who are returning home. These programs allow individuals with lived experiences to provide crucial reintegration support on campus.

As mentors, these women can share their knowledge and experiences, helping mentees overcome challenges and make informed decisions. This personalized support would foster a sense of belonging and connection within the campus community, which is especially valuable for individuals transitioning from unique backgrounds such as incarceration. The reciprocal exchange of knowledge and skills could enrich campus communities and cultivate a culture of collaboration and mutual support.

Colleges and universities also need to adopt a gender-responsive approach that considers the unique challenges of formerly incarcerated women during their academic pursuits. Unlike males, women face very unique challenges as they reintegrate into society. By recognizing these gender-specific factors, policymakers, community agencies, and service providers can support the rehabilitation and reintegration of women with incarceration experience.

By acknowledging the trauma many women may have experienced due to abuse, violence, and other forms of trauma both before and during their incarceration experience, it is critical to provide consistent trauma-informed care to help women rebuild their lives. Peer support groups on and off the campus, and mentoring support can provide a supportive network that offers a sense of belonging and empower women to thrive.

Limitations

The primary goal of this qualitative study was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the transitional journey of (N=8) formerly incarcerated women, their reintegration into the community, and their college experiences. The women who participated in this study have reintegrated at varying times, and their experiences took place over several years. However, this study exhibits certain limitations that warrant consideration. By utilizing a qualitative narrative approach with only eight women in one urban area of the United States, the findings' generalizability and external validity do not fully incorporate the broader population of women with incarceration experience who have attended college post-incarceration (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Therefore, increasing the dataset could increase the richness of the data collected.

The qualitative nature of a narrative study also poses limitations regarding subjectivity and researcher bias, although no participants attended the college where the researcher is employed. The purpose of conducting a narrative qualitative analysis was to capture the women's voices in this study. However, the narrative study includes the analysis of many transcribed documents, and the interpretation and analysis of the narratives rely on the researcher's subjective judgment, which can influence results (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Conclusion

This study explored the experiences of eight formerly incarcerated women, including their transition into the community and their college experiences. Using a narrative approach, themes that encompassed their journey were developed. By understanding their journey and their nuanced challenges, we can help women reintegrate into society using a gender-responsive and trauma-informed approach. The guiding theme of Challenges and Triumphs Beyond Incarceration encompasses the varied needs of women post-incarceration, including the need for safe and stable housing and mental health support. By addressing these immediate needs, women can continue to embark on their journey to break barriers and pursue their college degrees. The second theme, Breaking Barriers and Pursuing Degrees, provided insight into women's experiences in both in-prison education programs as well as enrolling in college post-incarceration. By participating on a college campus, women increase their social network, and a degree provides them with social mobility while reducing their recidivism rates. Finally, The Rise of the Phoenix: Empowering Women's Voices highlights leadership and advocacy opportunities for women to contribute to their community as social justice advocates.

APPENDIX A Recruitment Flyer

APPENDIX B Pre-Interview Questionnaire

1. What is your name: _____

2. What is your phone number: _____

3. What is your email address: _____

4. If you meet the requirements for this study and choose to participate, this study will use a pseudonym – a fake name- to keep your anonymity. What would you like your pseudonym to be for this study: _____

5. Which most closely describes your gender:

   ❑ Woman

   ❑ Transgender woman

   ❑ Non-Binary

   ❑ Other:_____

   ❑ Prefer not to offer

6. That is your preferred gender pronoun:

7. You must be 21+ years old to participate in this study. What is your current age?

8. Race/Ethnicity

   ❑ Black/African American

   ❑ Hispanic or Latinx

   ❑ Asia/Pacific Islander

   ❑ Native American/Alaskan

   ❑ White

   ❑ Other: _

Marital Status (Select One)

   ❑ Married

   ❑ Single

   ❑ Separated

   ❑ Divorced

   ❑ Engaged

   ❑ Widowed

   ❑ Prefer not to answer

9. Number of children (Select One)

- ❑ Zero
- ❑ One
- ❑ Two
- ❑ Three
- ❑ Four or more

10. Total years of incarceration (Select One)
- ❑ 0
- ❑ 1-11 months
- ❑ 1-3 years
- ❑ 4-6 years
- ❑ 7-10 years
- ❑ 11-25+ years

11. Year released from incarceration _____

12. Are you currently under supervision (probation/parole)
- ❑ Yes
- ❑ No
- ❑ Prefer not to answer

Level of Education *prior to initial incarceration*
- ❑ Did not graduate High School
- ❑ High School Diploma or equivalent
- ❑ AA Degree
- ❑ BA Degree
- ❑ MA Degree
- ❑ Other: _____

Did you participate in any educational programs while incarcerated (Select One)
- ❑ Yes, earned some credits, but did not finish
- ❑ Yes, earned a college degree
- ❑ No, Not offered

College Degree/Certificate earned or in progress, please list:
- • Degree Seeking or earned: (AA/AS, BA/BS etc.) _____
- • Institution Name: _____
- • Current Field of Study/Major: _____
- • Number of credits earned: _____

What is your academic goal? (Select one)

- ❑ Associate (A.A/A.S./A.A.S) Degree
- ❑ Bachelors (B.A/B.S) Degree
- ❑ Masters (M.A/M.S) Degree
- ❑ Doctoral (Ph.D/Ed.D) Degree
- ❑ Credential/License _____
- ❑ Other: _____

Are/were you involved in any reentry programs/agencies that support women with conviction histories?
- ❑ Yes
- ❑ No
- ❑ If yes, name of organization(s): _____

Thank you for taking the time to complete this form. This study will require you to participate in 3 separate interviews with the researcher. Each interview will last about 30 minutes. Please indicate your time preference:
- ❑ 9:00 am-12:00 pm (Morning)
- ❑ 1:00 pm-3:00 pm (Afternoon)
- ❑ 5:00 pm-7:00 pm (Evening)
- ❑ Other preferred time: _____

Dear

My name is Marsha Milan-Bethel, and I am a Student Services Specialist at the City University of New York (CUNY). I am also a St. John's University School of Education doctoral student. Thank you for wanting to learn more about my doctoral study on the transitional journey of formerly incarcerated women into their community and their college experience. This research project is intended to provide an understanding of your reintegration journey to your community and your undergraduate college experience. This research is essential as limited literature includes women's experiences. Capturing your voice and experience is the most critical part of this project! There are no right or wrong responses to the questions I will ask you.

To ensure I capture your experience appropriately, your participation in this study will involve 3 hours.
1. 10 minutes to complete a questionnaire about your background (age, gender, education, etc.)
2. three 30-minute virtual interviews concerning your transition to community & college experience.

Confidentiality: Your interviews will be recorded and transcribed for accuracy. Those transcripts will be shared with you to ensure your voice is captured accurately. Please note that your responses will not be associated with your name. I will use a pseudonym to support your anonymity. Your identity will NOT be disclosed at any time. All documents and audio files will require a security code to access and be destroyed upon study completion.

Possible Risks or Benefits: There are no known risks associated with your participation beyond those of everyday life. However, your time is valuable, and I will do my best to adhere to the abovementioned periods. Your participation in this study will inform me of your experiences regarding reentry, community transition, and your experience with institutions of higher education. Through this study, I hope to inform community programs, institutions of higher education, and policymakers of the challenges and supports with your college education.

Please reply by email at marsha.milanbethel18@stjohns.edu if you have any questions regarding this study. I have also included the consent form if you agree to participate.

Sincerely,

Marsha Milan-Bethel, Researcher

Dear participant:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in a research study investigating the transitional journey of formerly incarcerated women and their transition to the community and college. This study will be conducted by Marsha Milan-Bethel, a third-year doctoral candidate at St. John's University, School of Education, Queens, NY, Department of Administrative and Instructional Leadership. Your participation will contribute to this research and the limited literature on women's reentry and their experiences in higher education.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in three (3) individual remote interviews that will last approximately 45 minutes. The interviews will consist of open-ended questions about your reentry experience. The interview will be video recorded using Zoom to help the researcher capture your voice and provide feedback. The recording will not be shared with anyone else; it will only be used by the researcher. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate at any time during the study.

Your identity as a participant will remain confidential. Pseudonyms will be used instead to protect your identity. This consent form is the only document identifying you as a participant. This consent form will be stored securely on a password-protected computer in the researcher's home. Any electronic or digital data (Video recordings) will be written down and analyzed, and the recordings will be destroyed at the end of the study.

If you have questions about the purpose of this research study, you may contact the principal investigator, Marsha Milam-Bethel, at marsha.milanbethel@my.stjohns.edu. If you have questions concerning your rights as a human participant, you may contact the University's Human Subject Review Board at St. John's University at irb@stjhons.edu, or the research committee mentor, Katherine Aquino, via email at czadoaqk@stjohns.edu.
Agreement to Participate in this Study:

To participate in this study, I meet the following criteria:
1. I identify as a female of any race/ethnicity.
2. I am above the age of 21.
3. Have experience with incarceration within the United States.
4. I am a current undergraduate student or recent alumnus of a public or private university in New York.

Your signature acknowledges receipt of a copy of this consent form and your willingness to participate. Please know that you can withdraw your participation in this study without penalty.

Name and Signature of Participant:

Please print your name: _____

_____   ___/___/___
Signature of Participant   Date

Your signature is required for permission to be audio and video recorded during interview sessions. Signing below indicates that you agree to be audio and video recorded during the interviews for this study, with the understanding that you are free to withdraw your participation at any point without penalty. If you withdraw, all recordings of the interviews will be destroyed.
Check both boxes
  ❑ I consent to be audio recorded during the interviews for this study.
  ❑ I consent to be video recorded during the interviews for this study.

Please print your name: _____

_____   ___/___/___
Signature of participant: Date

Principal Investigator   **Doctoral Mentor**
Marsha Milan-Bethel   Dr. Katherine Aquino
Marsha.milanbethel18@ my.stjohns.edu   czadoaqk@stjohns.edu

APPENDIX E Interview Protocol Matrix

Introduction:
Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study. This study allows you to share your authentic voice about your reintegration experience with your community and college students.

Our interview today will last about 30 minutes, during which I will ask you about your (state goal of the interview below).

You completed a consent form and understand that this conversation will be confidential. On the consent form, you indicated I have your permission (or not) to audio record our conversation. Are you still ok with me recording our conversation today?

Yes/No
Yes: Thank you! Please tell me if you want me to turn off the recording or keep something you said off it. Also remember, as a participant you have the right to end this interview if you feel uncomfortable at any point.
No: Thank you for letting me know. I will only take notes of our conversation.

Before we begin the interview, I would like to review your responses to the Pre-Interview Questionnaire.

Do you have any questions for me?
Narrative Interview Questions

Session	Interview Questions
Interview **Session 1**	Goal: Learn the story of the transition experience
	Question: Tell me about your reentry experience.
	Follow-up questions *(if needed):* • What were some challenges you had to overcome? • What interactions within your immediate community did you find valuable? • Who or what made an impact on your transition?

At end the interview:
Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this study and sharing your transition experience with me. Your story is valuable to the literature, and I applaud your resiliency. Our following interview regarding your college experience is scheduled for **(date).**

Thank you so much. I look forward to our next meeting and will send you a calendar invitation with the link.

Interviews 2 and 3:
I am so happy to have you back to continue learning your reentry story. It has demonstrated resilience and tenacity.

As I mentioned in our last interview, you have completed a consent form and understand that this conversation will be completely confidential. On the consent form, you indicated that I have your permission (or not) to audio record our conversation. Are you still okay with me recording our conversation today?

Yes/No
Yes, Thank you! Please tell me if you want me to turn off the recording or keep something you said off it. Also remember, as a participant you have the right to end this interview if you feel uncomfortable at any point.
No: Thank you for letting me know. I will only take notes of our conversation.
Before we begin the interview, do you have any questions for me?

If any questions arise during this interview, you can feel free to ask them at any time. I would be more than happy to answer them.

Session	Interview Questions
Interview Session 2	**Goal: Transition to college** Question: Talk to me about your decision to enroll in college. When did it occur, and what was the motivation? Follow-up questions *(if needed):* • What, if any, supportive assistance did you seek in your community and/or in the college to get you where you are today? • What do you believe colleges need to know about supporting women with incarceration experience in earning their degrees?
Interview Session 3	**Goal: How do women identify success post-incarceration?** Question: Talk to me about a personal achievement since you have returned home. What was it, and who was involved? *Follow-up questions (if needed):* • Were there any previous life experiences that helped you in that moment? • Were there any people or programs that helped you with this achievement?

APPENDIX F Initial Start Codes with Definitions

- **Transition Experience:** instances when participant discusses their transition from prison to their community.
- **Transitional Housing:** Participant share experience with transitional housing or halfway house as part of their transition experience.
- **Housing Insecurity:** Participant mentions homelessness, inconsistent housing, etc.
- **Prison Education Program:** Participant mentions experience with In-Prison Education college programs
- **College Transition:** The participant discusses their college transition(s), including acceptance and/or transfer opportunities
- **Motivation:** Instances where participant shares their motivation to go to college and earn a degree.
- **Academic Experiences:** The participant mentions an experience within the college setting.
- **Family Support:** The participant mentions family and loved ones who provide support and guidance
- **Community Support:** participant is associated with one or more community programs
- **Employment:** Participant discusses employment opportunities and experiences
- **Community Supervision:** Participant refers to being on parole or probation
- **Restorative Justice:** participant shares experiences of community involvement, supporting others, and giving back to the community
- **COVID-19:** instances where participants share challenges regarding the pandemic
- **Technology:** instances where participants indicate challenges with technology

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