Motherhood Behind Bars: Effects of Incarceration on Parenting and Child Custody in the selected Correctional Facilities, the United States of America

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Abstract— *This qualitative study investigates how incarceration impacts motherhood, examining the emotional, legal, and identity-related challenges faced by incarcerated mothers. Drawing on feminist criminology and strain theory, it explores how gendered social structures, and personal stressors intersect to affect women's maternal roles while imprisoned. Based on interviews with incarcerated mothers across U.S. correctional facilities, the study highlights the disruption of parent–child bonds, fears of losing custody, and the enduring stigma of being labeled "bad mothers." Despite these challenges, many women demonstrate resilience, maintaining their maternal identities and striving for reunification through adaptive coping strategies. The findings underscore the urgent need for policy reforms, including family-centered prison programs, safeguards against automatic termination of parental rights, and robust reentry support. By centering the lived experiences of incarcerated mothers, the research contributes to feminist criminology and demonstrates how mitigating incarceration-related strain is crucial for promoting rehabilitation, preserving family unity, and disrupting intergenerational incarceration cycles.*

Keywords: Behind Bars; Child Custody; Correctional Facilities; Incarceration; Motherhood; Parenting.

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INTRODUCTION

The intersection of motherhood and incarceration has garnered increasing scholarly and policy attention in recent years as the female incarcerated population has surged. Over 60% of women in state prisons are mothers to minor children, reflecting the rapid growth of women's incarceration in the United States—a staggering 585% increase from 1980 to 2022 (Glaze and Maruschak 2008; The Sentencing Project 2024). With this rise, more families face the disruption of maternal imprisonment. Parental incarceration is now recognized as a significant adverse childhood event (ACE) that can negatively impact children's development and well-being (Arditti 2012; Foster and Hagan 2013). When mothers are incarcerated, their children often experience abrupt separation, emotional trauma, and changes in care-giving arrangements. Many children enter kinship care with grandparents or other relatives, and some are placed in foster care, raising the risk of permanent severance of the maternal relationship. Incarcerated mothers, meanwhile, struggle with the loss of daily parenting, fears of losing custody, and the challenge of preserving family ties from behind bars. This dynamic has been referred to as a "war on the family," given the profound collateral damage to maternal bonds and child well-being (Golden 2005).

While existing literature has documented the emotional, legal, and psychological tolls of maternal incarceration, critical gaps remain. First, few studies have prioritized the voices of incarcerated mothers themselves in shaping the discourse on policy and rehabilitation. Second, there is insufficient application of integrated theoretical frameworks—particularly feminist criminology and strain theory—that illuminate the broader structural forces and emotional pressures shaping maternal experiences behind bars. Third, most prior research has not sufficiently explored the lived experiences of mothers navigating custody threats, identity reconstruction, and coping strategies across different correctional settings, particularly among racially and geographically diverse populations.

This research presents a comprehensive, theory-informed examination of how incarceration affects women's roles as mothers and the custody of their children. Grounded in in-depth qualitative interviews with incarcerated women, this study captures their personal narratives about parenting under confinement. Against this background the research explore how incarcerated mothers experience and respond to the loss or disruption of daily maternal responsibilities; analyze how they maintain or reconstruct maternal identity in the face of stigma, policy barriers, and systemic neglect; and (contribute theoretically by applying feminist criminology and strain theory to understand how gendered power structures and personal stressors intersect in shaping these women's parenting realities. In doing so, the study aims to inform gender-responsive and family-centered reforms in criminal justice and child welfare systems.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on motherhood behind bars has established that maternal incarceration can have devastating and long-lasting effects on both women and their children. A consistent finding is that most incarcerated women are mothers of minor children. A Bureau of Justice Statistics survey found that over 60% of women in state prisons have at least one child under age 18 (Glaze and Maruschak 2008). Many of these women were the primary or sole caregivers prior to incarceration, meaning their imprisonment disrupts a child's main source of care and emotional support. In fact, incarcerated mothers are 2.5 to 3 times more likely than incarcerated fathers to have been the primary parent in their children's lives. This difference often means children of incarcerated mothers experience greater upheaval; while children of imprisoned fathers often remain with their mothers, those of imprisoned mothers frequently must transition to a new caregiver or enter the foster care system.

Child custody and foster care are pressing concerns in the context of maternal incarceration. Studies indicate that children of incarcerated mothers face a significantly higher risk of entering foster care compared to those of incarcerated fathers. One report noted mothers in prison were five times more likely than fathers to report their children being in foster care (Glaze and Maruschak 2008). Once in foster care, these children become subject to the timeline of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997. ASFA's "15/22 rule" requires states to terminate parental rights if a child has been in foster care for 15 of the past 22 months. Incarceration is not listed as an exception to this rule. Consequently, a prison sentence longer than 15 months can trigger termination proceedings regardless of a mother's desire or fitness to retain her parental rights (Brown and Bloom 2009). Indeed, nearly one in eight incarcerated parents with children in foster care ultimately have their parental rights terminated, even if they were not convicted of harming their child. This risk disproportionately affects mothers, given their higher likelihood of sole care-giving. Scholars and advocates have criticized this policy context as unduly punitive, arguing it fails to account for the structural incapacity of incarcerated parents to meet system demands for visitation or reunification while behind bars (Enos 2001; Arditti 2012).

Beyond legal custody, maintaining contact is a crucial challenge. Physical separation and prison regulations make regular communication between incarcerated mothers and their children difficult. Geographical distance is a major hurdle – women's prisons are fewer and often far from many children's homes. Families may face hours-long travel and significant expenses to visit. When visits occur, they are often in non-child-friendly settings (e.g., through glass partitions or with no physical contact), which can be confusing or scary for children. Many incarcerated mothers therefore receive infrequent or no visits from their children. Studies have found that most incarcerated mothers never get a single visit from their kids during their entire incarceration (Kennedy et al.

2020). This lack of contact exacerbates the pain of separation. Research shows that infrequent visitation strains the mother–child relationship, whereas maintaining contact (through visits, calls, letters) is associated with better parent–child attachment, reduced maternal anxiety, and more optimism about reunification (Poehlmann 2005; Mignon and Ransford 2012). Unfortunately, incarceration often introduces barriers to communication – high phone call costs, limited call times, mail censorship or delays – that make consistent contact hard to sustain. Some state statutes even interpret failure to maintain contact as evidence of abandonment, further endangering mothers' custody rights under the law.

The emotional and psychological toll of incarceration on mothers and children is well documented. Incarcerated mothers frequently experience intense guilt, shame, and anxiety regarding their children's well-being (Celinska and Siegel 2010; Arditti 2012). Many suffer from depression and worry that their children will "forget them" or feel unloved. They also fear that someone else (a foster parent or even a relative) may replace them in the child's affections, or that their parental rights will be severed before they can resume custody. Children of incarcerated mothers exhibit higher rates of emotional and behavioral problems, including anxiety, anger, and academic difficulties (Poehlmann 2005; Foster and Hagan 2013). When the maternal bond is disrupted, children often feel abandoned or confused, especially if given little explanation for their mother's absence. Over the long term, having a mother in prison can be traumatic – some scholars classify it as a form of ambiguous loss, where the parent is absent but not dead, leaving the child in a state of limbo (Arditti 2012). Notably, the emotional strain is reciprocal: as one study summarized, maternal incarceration contributes to mental health issues (like depression) in both incarcerated mothers and their children. These parallel struggles underscore the importance of family-centered interventions.

Scholars have also examined how incarcerated mothers negotiate identity and stigma. As noted, the societal narrative often deems them "bad mothers," a stigma that incarcerated women themselves may internalize (Easterling and Feldmeyer 2017; Rowe 2011). Yet studies find many of these women actively resist that label. In a qualitative study by Barnes and Stringer (2014), imprisoned mothers strove to continue "staking their claim as mothers" despite incarceration. They engaged in identity work, such as referring to themselves as "mommies" in letters, celebrating Mother's Day in prison, or saving artwork from their children, to preserve a sense of motherhood. Easterling and Feldmeyer (2017) describe how some mothers redefine motherhood in custody – for example, taking on surrogate mother roles to younger inmates or focusing on self-improvement so they can be better mothers upon release. Others follow what Enos (2001) observed in a prison ethnography: incarcerated mothers construct and maintain "mother positions" through strategic actions like managing their children's caregivers from afar or demonstrating care via phone and mail. These efforts allow women to uphold an image of themselves as mothers, even in constrained circumstances.

However, the ability to maintain a positive maternal identity varies. Some women unfortunately succumb to stigma and lose confidence in their motherhood. In Siegel's (2011) research, women who perceived severe judgment from family or social services sometimes disengaged from parenting efforts because the pain of perceived failure was too great. Others encountered what might be called "identity strain," feeling torn between the inmate role (which demands emotional toughness and adherence to prison rules) and the mother role (which demands nurturance and emotional availability). Managing these dual identities can be a formidable task. For instance, one might have to hold back tears after a distressing phone call with a child, because showing vulnerability in prison can invite victimization. Such internal conflicts are a psychological strain in themselves.

Finally, literature on programs and support suggests that targeted interventions can mitigate some negative outcomes. Parenting programs in prisons, although common (offered in over 90% of women's prisons), vary in quality and scope (Hoffman, Byrd, and Kightlinger 2010). Many focus on improving knowledge of child development or discipline techniques, but few address the trauma and grief of separation or help women navigate custody challenges (Bloom and Covington 2008). More holistic programs – including prison nurseries (where infants can stay with their mothers for a limited time) and enhanced visitation initiatives – have shown promising results. Evaluations of prison nursery programs in states like New York and Washington find improved mother–child attachment and even reduced recidivism among participating mothers. These programs also correlate with decreased maternal depression and stress. Outside of prison, reentry programs that connect mothers with housing, employment, and counseling, while also facilitating family reunification, are critical. Brown and Bloom (2009) emphasize that women leaving prison face many of the same challenges that contributed to incarceration (poverty, unstable housing, substance abuse), and without support, those strains can undermine their ability to regain custody or be effective parents. Thus, continuity of care from prison to community, with an eye toward family reintegration, is vital.

In summary, existing research paints a sobering picture of the impact of incarceration on motherhood: broken ties and legal risks for custody, psychological anguish, and identity struggles, all compounded by systemic obstacles. Yet it also points to mothers' remarkable determination to remain connected to their children and to reclaim the maternal role. This study builds on that knowledge base by providing updated qualitative insights and explicitly linking empirical findings to criminology theory. By hearing directly from incarcerated mothers, we aim to deepen understanding of their experiences and inform more gender-responsive, family-centered policies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Feminist Criminology

Feminist criminology provides a critical framework for understanding the experiences of incarcerated mothers by examining how gender and power relations shape pathways to crime, prison conditions, and social reactions to female offenders. Traditional criminology long neglected women's experiences, often viewing female offenders as anomalies or measuring them against male norms. In contrast, feminist criminologists like Meda Chesney-Lind (1989) and Kathleen Daly and Meda Chesney-Lind (1988) argued that women's criminal behavior and punishments are deeply influenced by patriarchal social structures and gendered expectations. Key tenets of feminist criminology include the recognition that women offenders often have histories of physical or sexual abuse, economic marginalization, and caretaker responsibilities – factors tied to patriarchal oppression and gender inequality.

Applying feminist criminology to incarcerated motherhood illuminates how imprisoned women are judged against idealized standards of femininity and motherhood. Society expects mothers to be selfless, morally upstanding caregivers, and criminal justice involvement violates these gendered stereotypes, tarnishing notions of the "good mother." Incarcerated mothers face a unique "double jeopardy" of gendered stigma – they are castigated not only as lawbreakers but also as mothers who have failed to uphold societal ideals of womanhood. Sharp and Eriksen (2003) describe incarcerated mothers as seen by some in society as "a threat to the moral conscience…by failing to meet proscribed standards of 'appropriate womanhood'." This stigma manifests in feelings of shame and in how institutions treat them; for example, prisons often provide scant support for maternal needs, reflecting an undercurrent of punitive sentiment toward women who deviated from gender norms (Bloom and Covington 2008).

Feminist criminology also emphasizes the structural inequalities that contribute to women's incarceration, such as poverty, limited economic opportunities, and abusive relationships. Many incarcerated women are survivors of domestic violence or childhood abuse – factors that can precede substance abuse or involvement in illegal activity as coping mechanisms (Wilson and Belknap 2008). The theory thus encourages examining each woman's pathway to prison in context, often revealing a pattern of victimization, poverty, or attempts to fulfill caretaking roles. For instance, some mothers commit crimes (like drug offenses or theft) in efforts to financially support their children or under coercion from abusive partners, scenarios tied to their marginalized social status. These circumstances are reflective of what has been described as women's "gendered pathways" to crime, wherein women's lawbreaking is frequently connected to their relationships and caregiving responsibilities (Daly and Chesney-Lind 1988; Chesney-Lind 1989).

In sum, feminist criminology sensitizes us to the gendered context of motherhood behind bars: how incarcerated mothers experience heightened stigma and unique burdens because they are women and caregivers, and how their voices have often been marginalized in policy debates. By foregrounding feminist insights, we better understand the interplay of patriarchy, crime, and justice in shaping both the challenges these mothers face and the systemic changes needed to address them. In the findings and discussion, we draw on this lens to interpret, for example, how the prison system's rules (often historically designed for men) can inadvertently punish women's maternal identity, or how incarcerated mothers resist stigma and redefine what it means to be a "good mother" in the face of adversity.

Strain Theory

To complement the feminist perspective, we incorporate strain theory – specifically Robert Agnew's General Strain Theory (GST) – to analyze how the stresses of incarceration impact mothers' emotions and behaviors. Strain theory traditionally posits that individuals may engage in crime or deviance when they experience significant stressors or strains (such as goal-blockage or loss of positive stimuli) that generate negative emotions, unless they have adequate coping mechanisms. Agnew's GST expands on Merton's classic strain theory by identifying a broader range of strains (not just economic) and by explaining the critical role of negative affect (anger, frustration, depression) in potentially leading to maladaptive or deviant responses (Agnew 1992; 2006).

In the context of incarcerated mothers, strain theory is useful for understanding their personal crises and coping strategies. Incarceration itself is a multifaceted strain: it removes positively valued stimuli (separating mothers from children, family, and community), introduces negative stimuli (prison deprivations, stigma), and blocks goal attainment (preventing women from fulfilling parental roles or reuniting easily with children). This confluence of strains often produces intense emotional distress. Many incarcerated mothers describe profound sorrow, guilt, or anger linked to being separated from their children and powerless to fulfill their parental duties. These emotions align with GST's notion that severe strains create pressure for corrective action, which might manifest in different ways.

Strain theory suggests that when people lack legitimate coping avenues, they may resort to unhealthy behaviors. In prisons, some mothers may cope maladaptively – for instance, engaging in rule infractions fueled by frustration, or numbing themselves emotionally ("shutting down" their feelings for their kids) to survive the pain.

GST also highlights that repeated or compounded strains (especially those seen as unjust or high in magnitude) are most likely to produce deviant or maladaptive responses. Incarcerated mothers often face compounded strains: not only imprisonment, but also past trauma (a pre-incarceration strain) and ongoing worries about their children's well-being or custody status. If a mother perceives the system as unjustly preventing her from seeing her children – for instance, if visitation is revoked due to minor infractions – the heightened sense of injustice can exacerbate anger or hopelessness. According to GST, this could increase the risk of misconduct or mental health breakdowns inside prison. Conversely, mothers who find meaning or hope (like religious faith or a plan to reunite post-release) might mitigate those negative emotions and avoid negative outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed exploratory research design through qualitative approach. The design used semi-structured interviews to explore incarcerated women's experiences with parenting and child custody during their imprisonment. A phenomenological approach guided the inquiry, aiming to capture the lived experiences of motherhood behind bars from the perspective of the women themselves. Given the sensitive nature of the topic and the diverse contexts of incarceration, qualitative interviews were deemed appropriate to elicit rich, first-person narratives that quantitative data might overlook.

The study involved 20 incarcerated mothers from a state women's prison and two county jails in the Mountain West and Southern United States. Eligible participants were female-identifying, aged 18 or older, incarcerated at the time of this study, and mothers of at least one child under 18. Using purposive sampling in collaboration with facility staff, the sample included women from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds (White, Black, Latina, and Native American) and a range of offense types and sentence lengths. Most participants were primary caregivers before incarceration, with 17 of the 20 living daily with their children pre-arrest. Children's care-giving arrangements post-incarceration varied: many lived with relatives, some with the other parent, and seven were in non-kin foster care. These care-giving contexts provided critical insight into mothers' fears and priorities. All participant names were replaced with pseudonyms, and quotations were annotated with descriptive identifiers to protect confidentiality. Mothers were assured participation was voluntary and could end at any time. Open-ended questions explored several areas: relationships with children before incarceration, impacts of arrest on care-giving, parenting efforts in prison, frequency and quality of contact with children, experiences with child welfare and custody issues, coping mechanisms, and future reunification plans. Interviewers used probes to elicit deeper, reflective responses about motherhood and incarceration.

Using a grounded theory–informed and deductive coding process, the research team developed codes based on both emergent data and theoretical interests, such as "maternal guilt" and "gendered stigma." Two coders ensured consistency by collaboratively coding a subset of transcripts and refining definitions before coding all data using NVivo software. Thematic analysis identified five key themes: emotional turmoil of separation, identity work in motherhood, custody fears, coping strategies, and institutional support or barriers. The team examined how experiences varied across contexts (e.g., jail vs. prison) and demographics (e.g., age, caregiver type). To strengthen validity, findings were shared with two formerly incarcerated mothers for feedback (member checking), and triangulation was conducted through observational notes and review of facility policies. This multi-method approach ensured a robust and context-sensitive analysis of incarcerated mothers' experiences.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Through the interviews, incarcerated mothers vividly described the complexities of trying to maintain their roles as parents while behind bars. The narratives revealed five central themes: (1) emotional turmoil due to separation, (2) enduring and resisting stigma as “bad mothers,” (3) strategies to maintain maternal bonds and identity, (4) fears and realities of losing custody, and (5) coping mechanisms and sources of support. Each theme is elaborated below with illustrative quotations from participants, who are identified by their description (incarcerated mother, age, and facility) following each quote.

Emotional Turmoil of Separation

All participants discussed the emotional pain of being separated from their children, often describing it as the most agonizing aspect of their incarceration. Many mothers reported experiencing intense guilt, anxiety, and sadness daily. As one mother tearfully shared, “Every night I cry myself to sleep missing my kids. I feel like I abandoned them and it’s killing me inside” (incarcerated mother, 32 years, state prison in Wyoming). This guilt was often tied to feeling that they had failed in their fundamental duty as mothers by becoming incarcerated. Mothers frequently used phrases like “my kids are suffering because of me” and “I wasn’t there for them,” reflecting deep remorse. The emotional distress was heightened by constant worry about their children’s well-being. One participant, who had three children living with her elderly mother, described her daily thought cycle:

> “I’m constantly thinking: Are they eating well? Are they scared? Do they think I don’t love them? It’s torture not knowing” (incarcerated mother, 45 years, Texas correctional facility).

Another mother whose toddler was in foster care expressed anguish over not being able to protect her child: “She’s only 2. At night I panic wondering, does she need me? Is she confused why Mommy isn’t there? I get anxiety attacks just picturing her crying for me” (incarcerated mother, 25 years, county jail in Colorado).

For several women, the separation induced or exacerbated mental health issues. About half the participants mentioned struggling with depression or severe anxiety since being incarcerated, and a few described having panic attacks, especially around times that would normally be spent with children (bedtimes, birthdays, holidays). One mother disclosed, “I was never on anxiety meds before, but after a month in jail away from my boys, I couldn’t stop having panic attacks. They finally put me on something, but it still hurts every day” (incarcerated mother, 29 years, county jail in Wyoming).

This emotional turmoil was compounded by feelings of powerlessness. Unlike problems at home where a mother could attempt to solve an issue for her child, in prison the mothers felt helpless. One said, “My son got appendicitis last year. I found out days later. I couldn’t be there for him, I couldn’t hold his hand in the hospital. I just had to sit here sick with worry” (incarcerated mother, 37 years, state prison in Texas). The inability to actively mother – to comfort a crying child, help with homework, or simply hug them – left many women feelings, in their words, “empty,” “useless,” or “broken.”

Notably, several women described the separation as a form of punishment beyond the sentence. One lifer stated, “Prison itself is hard, but being kept away from my daughter – that’s the cruelest punishment. It’s like my heart is serving the sentence” (incarcerated mother, 50 years, state prison in Wyoming). Another added, “They don’t just lock us up, they lock out our kids. It’s the worst thing they could do to a mother” (incarcerated mother, 34 years, Texas correctional facility). These statements underscore how, for mothers, incarceration’s harshest impact is often on the familial bond.

Enduring and resisting the “Bad Mother” Stigma

Participants were acutely aware of the stigma associated with being an incarcerated mother. Many felt judged by society, by their communities, and even by some family members as unfit or “bad” mothers because they were in jail or prison. One woman recalled how a cousin told her on the phone, “You should be ashamed; real mothers don’t end up in prison.” She reflected, “It hurt because deep down I already felt that shame” (incarcerated mother, 27 years, county jail in Texas). This internalized stigma was common – mothers often blamed themselves harshly, echoing the societal narrative. “I feel like the worst mom in the world for getting locked up,” said one. “I keep thinking, a good mom wouldn’t let this happen” (incarcerated mother, 30 years, state prison in Wyoming). Yet, despite feeling this weight of judgment, many participants actively resisted the “bad mother” label. They voiced determination to prove (to themselves and others) that incarceration had not stripped them of their love or commitment as mothers.

> "I made mistakes, but I'm still a mother, and I'm a damn good one when given the chance," asserted one woman (incarcerated mother, 40 years, state prison in Texas).

Another said she writes detailed letters to her children's caregiver about their routines and needs:

> "I want them to know I do care, I'm still involved. Just because I'm in here doesn't mean I stopped being their mom" (incarcerated mother, 38 years, state prison in Wyoming).

Some mothers spoke about how society's expectations of women and mothers made their situation harder. They felt that, as women, they were held to higher standards of parental responsibility. One participant observed, "When a dad goes to prison, people blame the individual man. But when a mom goes to prison, people act like she's betrayed motherhood itself. It's a double standard" (incarcerated mother, 44 years, state prison in Texas). This comment resonates with feminist criminological critiques that the world (including the justice system) is often patriarchal and more controlling of women (Chesney-Lind 1989). Another mother noted that during her sentencing, the judge scolded her while referencing her children, implying extra disgrace because of her maternal role – treatment she doubted a father in her position would have faced.

The stigma also played out in relationships with caregivers and child welfare. A few mothers reported conflict or tension with the people currently caring for their kids. In one case, a mother's sister had taken in the children, and the mother felt the sister was patronizing her during calls: "She'll say, 'They're fine, I'm taking good care of them,' like I wouldn't have. She makes little digs that because I'm in jail, I'm not a good mom. It's humiliating" (incarcerated mother, 35 years, county jail in Texas). In another case, a child welfare caseworker allegedly told one mother that her child was "thriving because you're not around," which devastated her: "They basically said I was the problem in my child's life. I know I messed up, but I love my son. I want to be better, not be erased" (incarcerated mother, 26 years, state prison in Wyoming).

Despite these painful encounters, resisting stigma often became a motivator for self-improvement. Several mothers described using their time incarcerated to change the narrative of being a "bad mother." For instance, one woman explained how she enrolled in every available course (parenting class, GED, drug treatment) because "I want to show everyone, including the judge and my kids, that I'm not who they think I am. I'm serious about being a better mom and person" (incarcerated mother, 31 years, state prison in Wyoming). Another mentioned she kept a journal in which she wrote daily affirmations like "I am a loving mother" to combat her internal shame and keep a positive focus.

A standout way mothers resisted stigma was by redefining motherhood on their own terms. They acknowledged they could not fulfill traditional maternal duties while locked up, so they sought to find new ways to express motherhood. One such way was offering emotional support and guidance to younger women in prison – essentially, mothering other inmates.

> "There's a 19-year-old here who reminds me of my daughter," one participant shared. "I kind of take her under my wing, talk to her when she's down. It makes me feel like I can still be nurturing someone, you know? Like my motherly instinct is alive" (incarcerated mother, 50 years, state prison in Texas).

Another mother said she mentored a pregnant inmate:

> "I taught her breathing exercises, gave her advice for when the baby comes. It's not my baby, but it felt good to use my mom's knowledge" (incarcerated mother, 36 years, state prison in Wyoming).

These actions can be seen as attempts to maintain a positive identity and sense of self-worth through "motherly" behaviors, albeit directed at peers. In this way, the women found generative roles for themselves even in confinement (Maruna, LeBel, and Lanier 2004).

In summary, incarcerated mothers in this study grapple with intense stigma but are not passive victims to it. While they carry shame, many push back – through words, actions, or internal resolve – refusing to let the "bad mother" narrative define them. They strive to demonstrate their love and commitment, whether to outsiders, family, or themselves, reasserting that they are still mothers despite the prison walls.

Maintaining Maternal Bonds and Identity

A prominent theme was the mothers' resourcefulness and determination in maintaining bonds with their children and sustaining a maternal identity despite the separation. Participants described a variety of strategies they employed to remain present in their children's lives and to feel like "mom" even from afar.

Communication efforts were central. Nearly every mother spoke of writing letters or making phone calls as often as possible. Even in cases where young children couldn't read or fully converse, mothers would send drawings, simple notes, or recorded messages. One mother of a three-year-old said, "I draw little cartoons and mail them. She can't read yet, but my mom shows her the pictures and tells her 'Mommy drew this for you.' It's my way of saying I'm here" (incarcerated mother, 26 years, county jail in Wyoming). Many mothers saved a portion of their limited prison income (or commissary funds) to make regular phone calls. "I work in the kitchen, that's $18 a month, and I spend most of it on phone time to talk to my kids every week," one mother noted proudly (incarcerated mother, 34 years, state prison in Texas). They often had scheduled calls (e.g., every Sunday afternoon) to create a routine. These calls were described as both a lifeline and, at times, an emotional minefield. As one described, "Hearing their voices gives me life. But when they cry 'I miss you, Mommy,' it shatters me. Still, I wouldn't trade those calls for anything" (incarcerated mother, 29 years, state prison in Wyoming).

Visitation was less common but deeply cherished when it occurred. Only about a third of participants had in-person visits with their children at least once during their incarceration, mostly those whose family or caregiver could travel. Those who did receive visits described them as emotionally overwhelming but affirming. One participant recounted the moment of seeing her kids in the prison visiting room after two years apart: "I was shaking, crying. I hugged them so tight. For that hour, it felt like I was me again – their mom, not inmate #____. It was hard when they left, but that visit gave me hope to hold onto" (incarcerated mother, 41 years, state prison in Texas). However, many mothers lamented that visits were not feasible due to distance or rules. Where available, some took advantage of special visitation programs (like a summer camp day for kids at the prison, or video visitation if offered). These opportunities were praised as crucial moments of connection.

The mothers also maintained bonds through indirect means. Several mentioned instructing caregivers to tell the children "Mommy loves you" daily or to give the kids a kiss "from me" at bedtime. One mother said, "I send them birthday cards with little hearts drawn all over. And I asked my sister to spray my perfume on their pillow sometimes, so they remember my smell. It sounds silly, but I want them to feel me there in any way possible" (incarcerated mother, 32 years, county jail in Texas). This creative thinking shows how mothers attempted to transcend the physical barriers with symbolic or sensory gestures.

In terms of maintaining identity, participants took steps to remind themselves and others that they were mothers. Many kept photos of their children in their cells or lockers as daily visual affirmation. One woman described her cell wall as a "photo shrine": "Pictures of my two boys everywhere. First day of school photos, goofy pictures, everything. It reminds me what I'm living for" (incarcerated mother, 38 years, state prison in Wyoming). Others talked about their children constantly to cellmates or staff, almost as if by speaking about them they kept that part of their life active. "Ask anyone here, they all know my son's name and how old he is – I make sure of that. I probably annoy people how much I talk about him, but that's how I keep being his mom," laughed one young mother (incarcerated mother, 22 years, county jail in Colorado).

Interestingly, mothers would use whatever institutional channels they could to fulfill maternal duties. One mother recounted how she participated in her child's school meetings via letters and calls: "I couldn't go to parent-teacher conferences, obviously. But I had my aunt put me on speakerphone with the teacher once. Another time I wrote a letter to the school counselor about my son's reading issues. I wanted them to know he still has a mom who cares" (incarcerated mother, 35 years, state prison in Texas).

While these efforts were sometimes limited by system cooperation, they highlight the mothers' persistence in parenting remotely.

A particularly poignant strategy for maintaining identity was future-focused thinking. Many women spoke about plans or promises regarding their kids after release, using those as motivational anchors. "I make lists of what I'll do when I get out: take my girls to the park, cook their favorite meal, never miss a bedtime story again," shared one mother (incarcerated mother, 30 years, state prison in Wyoming). Another had a calendar on which she crossed off days, telling her children on calls how many "sleeps" until mom comes home (even though her release date was tentative). This future orientation allowed them to frame their current incarceration as a temporary state, reinforcing that motherhood – in full capacity – was still their identity and destiny.

Despite their efforts, mothers also candidly spoke about times they felt their maternal bond weakening or feared it might. Some described heartbreaking moments like a child not wanting to speak on a call or calling someone else "Mom." One mother sobbed as she recounted, "My youngest started calling my mom [the grandmother] 'Mama.' I know she's just confused, she's 3, but it felt like a knife. I worry she won't know I'm her mom when I come out" (incarcerated mother, 28 years, county jail in Texas). These anxieties fueled their determination to maintain contact and identity yet also reflected the painful reality that time apart can alter family roles.

Overall, the theme of maintaining bonds and identity underscores the proactive and creative lengths to which incarcerated mothers go to remain "mom" despite immense obstacles. Through communication, symbolic presence, and future planning, they endeavor to keep the mother–child relationship alive. Their narratives show that motherhood is not a role easily relinquished – even behind bars, these women actively mother in any way they can.

Fears and Realities of Losing Custody

Concerns about child custody and the potential loss of parental rights loomed large in the interviews. Many participants lived with a persistent fear that they could permanently lose their children, either through court action or the erosion of their relationships over time. These fears were not unfounded; some mothers had already experienced the termination of their parental rights for one or more children, and others were during legal battles.

Several mothers mentioned the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) timeline – though not all by name, they referred to "that 15-month rule" that could sever their rights. One mother, whose two children were in foster care, explained with evident anxiety: "The state took my kids when I got arrested. Now the clock is ticking – 15 months in foster care and they move to terminate. I'm 14 months old now. My release isn't for another 5 months. I'm terrified I'm gonna hit that deadline and lose them forever" (incarcerated mother, 29 years, state prison in Wyoming). This mother's situation epitomizes the legal bind many faces. She described trying to fight it by writing letters to the family court and participating in hearings by phone, but felt her voice carried little weight from behind bars. As she put it, "They say I 'abandoned' my kids, but I didn't abandon them – I'm incarcerated. It's not the same, yet the law treats it the same." Her statement aligns with critiques that incarceration is often equated with abandonment in child welfare statutes.

Some mothers had already had their parental rights terminated (TPR) prior to our interviews. Their stories were harrowing. One woman, who was serving a long sentence for a drug-related offense, recounted how she lost custody of her 6- and 8-year-old while awaiting trial: "By the time I was sentenced, the state had already terminated my rights. I didn't even get to say goodbye. I got a letter saying I'm no longer legally their mother. It broke me" (formerly incarcerated mother, 35 years, reflecting on a TPR that occurred while she was in county jail, Texas). In her case, the children were adopted by another family. She shared this through tears, conveying a profound grief: "They're gone from me. Even when I get out, I can't get them back. It makes me question if life is worth living." This extreme outcome – permanent separation – is a deeply traumatic event that a few participants either endured or actively feared.

Even outside formal termination, mothers worried about losing custody de facto. For those whose children were with family or the other parent, there was fear that these caregivers might not return the children to them upon release. One mother explained her worry: "My ex-husband has our kids now. He's telling everyone I'm unfit and he'll make sure I never get them back. I'm scared the court will side with him when I'm out because of my record" (incarcerated mother, 33 years, state prison in Wyoming). Another mother whose sister was caring for her son suspected that her sister was growing too attached: "I appreciate my sister stepping up, but I sense she thinks of my son as her son now. She hinted, 'Maybe it's better if he stays with me even after.' That sent me into panic" (incarcerated mother, 25 years, county jail in Texas).

The mothers often described actively fighting for their rights despite limited resources. Many participated in family court hearings by phone when allowed, though this was described as frustrating – one said, "You feel so helpless on a staticky line trying to plead your case. You can't see anyone's face, can't hold your child. It feels stacked against you" (incarcerated mother, 30 years, state prison in Texas). Some had court-appointed attorneys for child welfare cases, but they did not always trust that those lawyers were invested in helping them reunify. A few women recounted trying to send gifts or letters to their children through social workers or foster families to show they cared, sometimes not knowing if those ever reached the child.

In conclusion, custody concerns pervade incarcerated mothers' lives, adding a layer of chronic fear and urgency. The collision of rigid child welfare timelines with the realities of incarceration places these mothers in precarious positions. Their testimonies reveal a desperate hope to keep their children and an acute awareness that the system might take them away, which deeply influences their mental state and behavior while incarcerated.

Coping Mechanisms and Sources of Support

Facing the emotional pain, stigma, and fears described above, incarcerated mothers in this study employed various coping mechanisms to manage day-to-day life and retain some sense of stability. They also drew on different sources of support, both within themselves and from external relationships or programs. These coping strategies and supports were crucial for their mental health and for surviving the incarceration experience as mothers.

Emotional suppression and compartmentalization were common coping mechanisms. Many mothers talked about learning to "numb out" or compartmentalize their feelings to function in the prison environment. One mother noted, "If I let myself feel all this sadness all the time, I'd lose my mind. So, I push it down during the day. I kind of turn off the 'mom part' of me when I must, like when I'm working or around others, and only let it out at night in my bunk" (incarcerated mother, 34 years, state prison in Texas). This kind of emotional regulation – essentially bottling up feelings – was seen as necessary by some to avoid breaking down or appearing vulnerable. It echoes what strain theory would term a coping strategy to handle negative emotion, albeit one that might have mixed long-term effects. A few mothers admitted this suppression sometimes gave way to outbursts if the pressure built too much (for example, one described snapping at a cellmate "over nothing" because she was really upset about missing her child's birthday).

Another coping strategy was cognitive reframing – trying to find silver linings or rationalize the situation. For example, a mother serving a short sentence told herself that prison was a chance to "get clean and come out better for my kids," turning her incarceration into a potentially positive break from a destructive life.

"It sounds weird, but I treat this time like rehab or a reset. I hated leaving my kids, but I was a mess on drugs out there. Here, I'm sober, I'm thinking clearly. I'm gonna use this time to get healthy so I can be a proper mother when I'm out" (incarcerated mother, 28 years, county jail in Wyoming). By reframing her narrative, she copes by assigning purpose to the separation.

Faith and spirituality were cited by many as a key support. Over half the women mentioned praying, reading religious texts, or attending chapel services. One mother said, "I pray for my kids every night. I believe God is watching over them since I can't.

That faith is the only thing that lets me sleep" (incarcerated mother, 45 years, Texas correctional facility). Another carried a Bible with photos of her children tucked inside, saying she felt closer to them when she prayed. For some, believing in a higher power's plan or mercy alleviated some guilt and gave hope – e.g., "I trust that God will reunite me with my babies when the time is right. That belief keeps me going on the darkest days" (incarcerated mother, 33 years, state prison in Texas).

Peer support within the facility also played an important role. Several mothers formed informal support networks with other incarcerated mothers. They would share advice, lend a listening ear on hard days, or even celebrate each other's children's birthdays as a group in small ways (like a prayer or a handmade card). One participant described her closest friend inside, who was also a mom: "When one of us gets a tough call or bad news, the other talks us through it. We remind each other that our kids need us alive and sane. We've stopped each other from doing anything stupid or giving up hope more than once" (incarcerated mother, 38 years, state prison in Wyoming). This camaraderie among mothers created a micro-community of understanding. It was notable that these peers could become a surrogate family; one woman called her group of mom-friends "my prison sisters" and said they all refer to each other's kids as their "nieces and nephews."

On the formal support side, prison programs and counselors were occasionally mentioned, though their availability varied. Some participants had access to mental health counselors or social workers. Those who utilized counseling generally found it helpful to talk through their feelings. "I see the prison therapist once a month. Honestly, just having someone ask about my kids and how I feel helps. I usually cry the whole session, but I feel lighter after" (incarcerated mother, 29 years, state prison in Texas). However, not all facilities had robust mental health support, and a few women expressed distrust in sharing too much with staff (fearing it might be seen as weakness or recorded negatively).

Parenting programs were available to some and provided coping tools. For example, in one prison, a parenting class taught strategies for communicating with children age-appropriately about incarceration, which a mother found useful: "They helped me figure out what to say to my 5-year-old about why I'm here. Before, I didn't know how to explain it and it was eating me up. Now I have a way to talk to her that is honest but not scary. That eased a burden" (incarcerated mother, 35 years, state prison in Wyoming). Another mother in jail participated in a program where they could record themselves reading bedtime stories on tapes to send to their kids, which she described as therapeutic: "Reading the story out loud, knowing my baby will hear it, it made me feel connected and calmed me" (incarcerated mother, 22 years, county jail in Texas).

Crucially, family support outside was a major buffer. When participants had reliable, sympathetic caregivers for their children (be it their own mother, a sister, or a supportive partner), they coped better. They drew comfort from knowing their children were loved and safe. One inmate said of her mother who was caring for her kids, "I can breathe because I know my mom is basically stepping into my shoes. She raises them how I would. We talk every week, and she makes sure I'm still involved in decisions. That support is everything" (incarcerated mother, 40 years, state prison in Texas). In contrast, those who distrusted caregivers or lacked family support often had higher stress.

Several mothers highlighted staying busy as a coping tactic. Idleness could lead to ruminating on worries, so they volunteered for jobs (kitchen, sewing, library) or programs to fill time. One noted, "I work out a lot. Like a lot. It's my stress outlet. When I'm running laps, I imagine I'm running towards my kids. It keeps my body and mind in shape" (incarcerated mother, 31 years, state prison in Wyoming). Others immersed themselves in reading or crafting small gifts to send to their children (when allowed) as a productive distraction.

Finally, an underlying coping mechanism was hope and visualization of reunion. Mothers coped by visualizing reunion scenes, planning for the future, and keeping hope alive that they would one day be with their children again. Hope was described almost like a lifeline. "I have this mental movie I play when I'm really down," shared one mother. "I see myself walking out the gates and my kids running into my arms. I replay that hug in my head. I need that image, it keeps me from despair" (incarcerated mother, 27 years, county jail in Wyoming). This aspirational thinking, though it sometimes clashed with uncertainties, was a deliberate way to combat hopelessness.

In summary, incarcerated mothers utilized a combination of inner coping strategies (emotional regulation, reframing, hope) and external supports (faith, peer groups, family, programs) to withstand the immense pressures they faced. The efficacy varied – some days these coping mechanisms barely kept them afloat – but overall, these strategies were essential survival tools. The mothers' resilience, in the face of so many stressors, is evident in how they actively sought ways to care for their own mental well-being while confined.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The narratives of incarcerated mothers in this study highlight a central paradox: even as these women are physically separated from their children and labeled "offenders" by the justice system, their identities and actions remain profoundly anchored in motherhood. By applying feminist criminology and strain theory to interpret the findings, we can better understand both the societal context that shapes these experiences and the individual emotional processes at play.

From a feminist criminological perspective, the experiences detailed by participants underscore how gendered expectations and patriarchal structures amplify the pains of imprisonment for women. The theme of stigma – feeling like or being called "bad mothers" – reveals how deeply ingrained the ideal of the self-sacrificing, ever-present mother is in society. When these women were unable to perform that role due to incarceration, they faced harsh moral judgment. This aligns with literature noting that incarcerated women are viewed as violating not just legal norms but also gender norms of femininity and nurturance (Sharp and Eriksen 2003; Easterling and Feldmeyer 2017). One participant's observation that society treats an incarcerated mother as if "she's betrayed motherhood itself" aptly captures this dynamic. Feminist criminologists have long argued that the criminal justice system is not gender-neutral; rather, it often punishes women, implicitly or explicitly, for transgressing gender roles (Chesney-Lind 1989). In our findings, this was evident in the accounts of judges scolding mothers about their children during sentencing, or child welfare caseworkers casting aspersions on their maternal character.

Moreover, feminist theory sheds light on the pathways that led many of these mothers to imprisonment – pathways often paved with socioeconomic disadvantage, trauma, and survival strategies. Several women in our sample referenced substance abuse, which they linked to coping with past abuse or to maintaining an income (through drug trade or theft) to support their kids. These circumstances are reflective of what has been described as women's "gendered pathways" to crime, wherein women's lawbreaking is frequently connected to their relationships and responsibilities (such as trying to provide for children in poverty or reacting to abuse). Such contexts differ from typical male pathways and call for different considerations in both sentencing and rehabilitation. Feminist criminology advocates that the justice system and social services consider these mitigating life circumstances – for example, providing alternatives to incarceration for mothers where appropriate, or trauma-informed care in prison – rather than treating these women as simply "bad" or "deviant." Unfortunately, many participants' stories indicated that such nuance was lacking in their treatment.

Applying feminist insights to the incarcerated setting itself, we see that prisons often fail to accommodate women's caregiving roles. Historically designed for men, prison policies around visitation, communication, and programming can inadvertently marginalize mothers. For instance, the limited visitation and costly phone calls (which participants frequently described as barriers) reflect a system not oriented to maintaining family ties. A feminist critique would be that this oversight stems from a patriarchal view that undervalues caregiving as "women's work" and fails to prioritize it in policy. However, the mothers' calls for more visitation programs, parenting classes, or simply being treated with dignity as mothers in prison represent a plea to incorporate a more gender-responsive approach that feminist scholars and advocates have long recommended (Bloom and Covington 2008).

In sum, feminist criminology helps us recognize that the challenges these women face are not just individual troubles but are linked to broader gendered injustices – from the stigma burdening them to the policies that fail to support them. Despite these systemic issues, the women's resilience (resisting stigma and defining motherhood on their terms) is a testament to their agency even within constraints.

From the vantage of strain theory, particularly Agnew's General Strain Theory, we can interpret the mothers' emotional turmoil and coping behaviors as responses to the severe strains inherent in their situation. Incarceration for a mother encapsulates multiple types of strain Agnew identifies: the loss of positively valued stimuli (loss of daily contact with children), the presence of noxious stimuli (prison conditions, stigma, guilt), and blockage of goal achievement (inability to fulfill maternal duties or protect custody). These strains inevitably produce negative affect – which we saw manifest as despair, anxiety, and anger among participants. The theory predicts that individuals will use coping strategies to deal with these emotions, and indeed our results showcased a range of coping mechanisms, both healthy and maladaptive.

For example, consider a mother's angry outburst at a guard after being denied a phone call. Strain theory would frame that because of accumulated frustration from being separated and then having even the chance to talk to her child thwarted – a classic strain response where the person lashes out due to perceived injustice or overwhelming stress. On the other hand, mothers who conformed strictly to rules to preserve visitation privileges exemplify adaptive coping as a strain response: they channeled the strain (fear of losing contact) into compliant behavior, as one participant described walking away from conflicts to avoid infractions that could jeopardize her reunification chances. GST notes that the presence of strong social support or incentives for conformity can mediate how strain translates to behavior; here, the love for children and hope of reunification served as such powerful incentives for many to cope pro-socially (by self-regulating, seeking programs, etc.).

Another GST insight is the idea of cognitive coping, where one reinterprets a strain to diminish its impact. We saw instances of this: mothers reframing their imprisonment as a chance to self-improve or detox (thus seeing it less as purely a punishment and more as an opportunity), which helped reduce anger or self-pity. This is a coping mechanism that aligns with Agnew's concept of minimizing the personal significance of strain or maximizing the positive. By telling herself "I'm using this time to become a better mom," an incarcerated woman mitigates feelings of helplessness and maintains a sense of agency, which can buffer against negative emotions.

Strain theory also considers the influence of prior strains and vulnerabilities. Many of our participants had pre-existing strains (e.g., histories of abuse or poverty). Those cumulative strains can increase sensitivity to new strains, potentially making these mothers even more emotionally raw or likely to struggle. One might speculate that mothers with unresolved trauma have a harder time coping with incarceration strain, possibly contributing to some of the severe depression or even suicidal ideation that a couple of women hinted at when discussing despair. Conversely, those with protective factors (like strong family support outside, or a resilient personality) might navigate the strain with more optimism.

We can integrate feminist criminology with strain theory for a holistic interpretation: the strains these mothers face is to some extent produced or exacerbated by gendered social structures. For example, the ASFA timeline (a strain) disproportionately harms mothers because mothers are more often sole caregivers going into prison. That law was written in a gender-neutral way, but in practice it exerts a unique strain on women – a feminist observation – which then leads to acute emotional reactions (panic, fear of TPR) and coping attempts (writing letters to court, etc.), as strain theory outlines. Another example: stigma is both a feminist issue (patriarchal judgment of women) and an emotional strain (causing shame and anger). The women's coping with stigma by forming peer support networks or asserting positive identities is a way to alleviate that strain.

The discussion also extends to the implications of these findings. The strains documented are not inevitable; they could be reduced by policy changes, and doing so would likely improve outcomes for both mothers and children. Strain theory would suggest that if we reduce strains (e.g., make it easier for mothers to maintain contact with children, exclude incarceration as a sole ground for TPR, provide better mental health care), we should see less negative emotional fallout and fewer maladaptive behaviors (like prison infractions or self-harm) among incarcerated mothers. Feminist criminology pushes further, urging systemic reforms that address the root causes – for instance, providing community support to prevent women from having to commit crimes to feed their children, or offering alternatives to incarceration for women who pose little threat but have caregiving duties.

The participants' experiences also raise broader questions about justice and rehabilitation. Does punishing mothers in ways that sever family bonds truly serve public safety or societal good? From a feminist ethic-of-care perspective, one could argue the state has an obligation to treat these family ties with more compassion, given the documented intergenerational harms when they are broken. Strain theory similarly argues that exacerbating strains (for example, by denying visits or terminating parental rights) can lead to worse outcomes – both for an individual's rehabilitation and potentially for children's likelihood of future delinquency, as some studies show. Thus, a synthesis of our theoretical insights suggests that alleviating the burdens on incarcerated mothers is not only humane but also pragmatic in breaking cycles of trauma and crime.

Finally, reflecting on the mothers' resilience: many found meaning – whether through faith, peer mentorship, or future hopes – that allowed them to endure. This resilience is remarkable and aligns with the feminist notion of women's agency even in oppressive circumstances. However, we should be cautious not to romanticize resilience; their strength often came at great personal cost and despite systemic neglect, not because the system aided them. Recognizing their resilience should motivate institutions to support it – for example, by facilitating those peer support circles in more formal ways or by including incarcerated mothers' input when designing programs and policies that affect them.

CONCLUSION

The study has shed light on the often-overlooked experiences of incarcerated mothers, examining how imprisonment affects their parenting roles and custody of their children. Through first-hand accounts, we have seen the intense emotional suffering these women endure, the stigma they combat, and the creative ways they strive to remain mothers against all odds. The integration of feminist criminological and strain theory perspectives has allowed us to appreciate the dual influences of societal structures and personal stressors on these experiences. The study recommends that prisons and jails should adopt policies that facilitate, rather than impede, mother–child contact. This includes offering more generous visitation opportunities (contact visits, extended family visit programs), subsidizing phone calls or providing free video calls, and allowing communication (letters, photos) with minimal delay. Research consistently shows that maintaining family ties can improve inmate behavior and post-release success (Mignon and Ransford 2012), and our study demonstrates it is essential for mothers' and children's well-being. Lastly, provide robust reentry programs focused on family reunification. This includes transitional housing that accommodates children, parenting classes and family therapy as part of reentry planning, and legal aid to help mothers navigate custody or visitation arrangements post-release. Supporting mothers in the delicate period of reuniting with children can reduce the risk of recidivism and promote healthier outcomes for families. The study concluded that incarcerated mothers' experiences are deeply intertwined with issues of gender justice and emotional strain. Addressing the challenges of motherhood behind bars is not only a matter of compassion but also of pragmatic policy: by supporting these mothers, we support the children and communities connected to them, ultimately aiming to break cycles of trauma and incarceration.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Further studies should explore the long-term outcomes for children of incarcerated mothers, the effectiveness of recent policy changes aimed at supporting family connections (such as prison nursery expansions or video-visitation programs), and the experiences of fathers in similar situations to compare gendered differences. Research should also continue to elevate the voices of incarcerated parents themselves in evaluating what interventions are most helpful.

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