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ON THE AFFECT OF FAMILY TIES, FRIENDSHIPS,
AND SENTENCE LENGTH ON AN INMATE'S
EXPERIENCED SEVERITY OF IMPRISONMENT

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ABSTRACT

Imprisonment is a varied experience depending on the individual and their personal characteristics. Female inmates are a significantly rising portion of our prison population today (Islam, Banarjee, and Khatum 2014). With that in mind, it is important to understand female experiences in prison and the overall severity of their experience. Female inmates have been an ignored segment of the prison population for a long time and research has not paid much attention to their experiences in contrast to male inmates (Islam, Banarjee, and Khatum 2014). In this thesis, I have used an existing dataset consisting of female inmates to explore how 1) family ties and relationships, 2) friendships and social networks, and 3) sentence length all have an impact on the female inmate's perceived severity of imprisonment. The data being utilized consists of qualitative interviews from female inmates, where they were asked an array of questions about their prison experience, life after prison, and health to name a few.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In recent years, rates of mass incarceration have been on the rise in the United States with no signs of slowing down in the future. These rising rates should be a warning sign to professionals in the criminological field that the prison experience and the impacts it has on inmate's post release should be taken seriously in research. To explain how incarceration affects the lives of those imprisoned and mass incarceration rates in general, current social and political factors need to be examined more thoroughly (Campbell, Vogel, and Williams 2015). If these factors are examined closer, we can better understand the experience of those incarcerated and how that relates to their experiences post release. For this project, the relationship between severity of imprisonment and an inmate's chance of recidivating post release will be examined in depth. This project will focus on the specific factors that impact the female inmate's severity of imprisonment. The qualitative concept that will be explored in this research is the experience of imprisonment for female inmates and what factors impact their experience. Little attention has been paid to female offenders in the criminal justice system and that is why this is an important demographic to consider for future research. For this research information from a women's prison in the state will be utilized to better understand this concept. This data will be useful because it will take into consideration the female experience while imprisoned and the different strains that female prisoners face compared to male prisoners.

All these factors that are going to be focused on including, family ties, friendships, sentence length, and gender are important influencers on the prison experience of the female inmate (Bales and Piquero 2012). However, it is evident that the ultimate goal of imprisonment

is neglected, to keep an individual from committing the same or similar acts in the future. I believe the system punishes just to punish because a better alternative has not come forward. Research on this topic needs to be expanded and consider what is it about our prison conditions that cause inmates to so easily fall back into old habits once released. This is not to say that an offender should not be punished for their actions. This is just to say that there should be a more effective style of punishment that should be implemented to get the best results in the quickest, most cost-effective way possible.

This research may draw from strain theory and symbolic interactionism. Strain theory in this context is apparent. Prison itself is a stressful experience and causes significant amounts of strain on an inmate. This strain in turn causes an inmate to act in different ways than they normally would because they are trying to adapt to a new environment (Morris et al., 2012). Symbolic interactionism can also be applied in this case because people take interactions they have with others and create meaning out of things from those interactions. In prison this is true as well, people adapt by learning from others around them to survive the prison environment. Severity of imprisonment is another factor that relates to this theory because it takes the prison experience, which is heavily influenced by others, and directly influences the individual and their experience. The dependent concepts that this study will focus on will include perceived severity and actual severity of imprisonment. Perceived severity has more to do with how the individual copes with the prison experience. Actual severity could be related to things like sentence length, prison conditions, and many other factors. This study will take a closer look at what factors impact perceived and actual severity of a prison environment and how that relates to an inmate's chances of recidivating post release.

For this project I am going to be testing the four following hypotheses:

H1: I hypothesize that individual family relations will be significantly related to the perceived severity of imprisonment. This is an exploratory hypothesis due to the fact that past research suggests that family relations can contribute to perceptions of sentences as being both less severe and more severe, depending on the individual circumstances.

H2: My second hypothesis will address how an individual's relationships in and out of prison can significantly impact how an inmate behaves in and out of prison. I hypothesize that in prison relationships can significantly impact how an inmate behaves in prison and out of prison.

Relationships out of prison that are important include, a mother's relationships with her child. A mother's experience in prison is important to study because this could affect her relationship with her child post release. Prison relationships and friendships, like family ties, are also an important form of motivation for inmates. This hypothesis is exploratory because there has been an abundance of research stressing the importance of friendships out of prison and strong friendships in prison.

H3: My third hypothesis is that the longer the prison sentence, the more the individual will perceive their sentence as severe. I hypothesize that the longer the prison sentence, the more the individual will perceive their sentence as severe. Sentence length is also directly tied to actual severity of imprisonment because it is used as a main factor in explaining severity. This hypothesis is exploratory due to the fact that past research has indicated that the increase in severe sentences will prove to have deterrent effects on an individual in the future.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

When examining the question, to what extent does severity of imprisonment affect an inmate's chances of recidivating post release, there are many factors that must be taken into account. This topic has far-reaching importance for those in the criminological field and those who have been imprisoned themselves. There are many important reasons to study this topic, for instance if we try to answer this question more in depth, rates of mass incarceration and recidivism post release can be reduced, more light can be shed on the female offender, and the ultimate goal of imprisonment can be addressed. The overarching goal should be to keep offenders from reoffending in the future.

Importance

When it comes to reducing rates of mass incarceration, it is important to first look at how severity of imprisonment affects those who are already incarcerated and those after they are released. Mass incarceration is significantly affected by the current structure and strategies of crime control that are in place. A prime example of crime control strategies that have affected incarceration rates, were the tough on crime policies that started gaining momentum in the 1960s (Campbell, Vogel, and Williamson 2015).

These tough on crime strategies were “the product of layers of legislative decisions, primarily enacted at the state level, to charge and imprison more offenders, increase sentences, limit prison releases, and expand carceral capacity. These decisions combined to create a new era in which prisons became primary weapons in the nation's war on crime” (Campbell, Vogel, and Williamson 2015). Essentially, the purpose of these tough on crime policies were to combat

the war on crime that was occurring. In turn, these policies started an era of mass incarceration that our criminal justice system is still struggling to lower. If researchers were to take a step back and look at the prison experience as a whole and the different levels of severity experienced by prisoners, the field can come to address the issue of mass incarceration in our prison system.

Another reason examining severity of imprisonment is important is that if this issue can be addressed, then the system can work to tackle the separate, but equally important, issue of recidivism post release. Recidivism post release is one of the most prominent issues plaguing our society that former inmates have a hard time overcoming. If the conditions that make prison more severe in the first place are addressed, then the issues that individuals face once they are released can also be addressed as to keep them from offending in the future. It has been mentioned that “traditional measures of prison severity reflect the intended rather than the experienced severity of punishment” (Raaijmakers et al., 2016). It all comes down to the individual and what certain stressors cause them to experience prison as more or less severe as someone else. As a society and a criminal justice system, if these personal issues that cause different levels of severity experienced during and after prison can be addressed, this could lessen the number of individuals who reoffend in the future.

Going off of that, there is a group of individuals in the system who are neglected even further. This group is composed of female offenders, female offenders are one of the most overlooked groups in our prison system. The stereotypical offender most people think of, more often than not, a male. However, female offenders are one of the fastest growing demographics in the prisons system (Islam, Banarjee, and Khatum 2014). With this demographic rising, this brings about questions concerning “how did these females end up in prison” and “how can we help them from reoffending in the future.” Female offenders’ needs differ from the needs of the

male offender. Since females have a different role in society and different pathways into prison, they need different services than say a male offender would need.

This disregard for females in the criminal justice system goes back to the core power arrangement of society. “It was believed till a few decades ago that crime is predominately a male phenomenon and the world of crime is only a man’s world. The subject of female criminality was totally a neglected phenomenon” (Islam, Banarjee, and Khatum 2014). Even in the criminal justice realm, it is still a male dominated place. Females committing crimes challenges the idea that they are supposed to be subordinate to the male, that committing these crimes makes them somewhat “less feminine” or unnatural. When we think of why a male commits a crime, they are rarely thought of as “unnatural”, he is thought to be doing what he needed to do to survive or help his family. When a female commits a crime, she is thought to be unnatural or not human. This goes back to how females are stereotypically expected to act in society, “the rational being that since normal women are passive, the few women who do commit violent crime must be sick” (Islam, Banarjee, and Khatum 2014).

The reasoning behind why any individual commits a crime is perplexing in nature, it is believed to be odd or against the norm. However, in reality females and males commit crimes for very different reasons. Females have different pathways and motives for the crimes they commit. Along with these motives’ female have different responsibilities and stressors in and out of prison that affect their levels of severity in and out of prison.

In the end, this neglect of females neglects the ultimate goal of imprisonment. Now there is not a single goal of imprisonment, but generally it is to keep the individual from reoffending in the future and keeping society a safer place for everyone to live. Over the years our overall goal of the prison system has somewhat gotten lost. The system has been imprisoning a large number

of individuals and experiencing problems because of the overcrowding. This country has stood behind the idea “that placing offenders behind bars reduces recidivism by teaching them that “crime does not pay” (Cullen, Jonson, and Nagin 2011). However, if this topic is looked at deeper we find, “using an evidence- based approach, we conclude that there is little evidence that prisons reduce recidivism and at least some evidence to suggest that they have a criminogenic effect” (Cullen, Jonson, and Nagin 2011). This would make sense if the whole concept of prison is thought about at a very basic level. Occasionally, violent offenders are being put in very close living quarters with other possibly violent offenders. This close contact is a breeding ground for sharing techniques and other facets of a criminogenic lifestyle. Upon release this time spent can make individuals more dangerous than when they entered the facility.

All in all, the purpose of my study is multifaceted. The things this study will be focusing on are explaining rates of recidivism of former inmates, more specifically understanding the roles of female inmates compared to male inmates. Lastly, this study will focus on the role of friendships and social networks in an individual’s perception of severity of the prison experience.

Study Details

The first purpose of this study will be to further elaborate on the experience of the female inmate, with the goal of future research being focused on rates of recidivism of former inmates. Recidivism occurs when individuals are released, and they do not have the tools or proper support system to lead to have a successful reentry in to the community. A large number of these individuals fall back into old patterns of criminality because they either do not know any better or do not have any means to being better. Another factor that can influence an individual’s

chances of reoffending is when they expect a change in their sentence while imprisoned (Drago, Galbati, and Vertova 2007).

In the article from Drago, Galbati and Vertova (2007), they discuss the deterrence theory and how it affects individual's reactions when they are living in a prison environment. They go on to explain that, "the theory of deterrence suggests that a marginal increase in expected punishment *ceteris paribus* reduces the propensity to commit criminal acts (general deterrence)" (Drago, Galbati, and Vertova 2007). All this simply means is that an individual incarcerated, under the theory of deterrence expecting an increase in their sentence or punishment, will be less likely to commit criminal acts in the future. The theory of deterrence is important to consider in this context. If this is looked at a deeper level, deterrence is the basis that our prison system works off of. It is believed that, if and individual is imprisoned for an extended period of time they will learn their lesson and not reoffend in the future. However, this is not always the case. In this study done by Drago, Galbati, and Vertova (2007), they found that "a longer period served in prison tends to decrease the deterrent effect of an additional month of expected sanction". They go on to explain how this can be hard to understand because our general understanding is that the "experience of punishment should increase the sensitivity to future expected punishment" (Drago, Galbati, and Vertova 2007). They conducted a natural experiment to test their assumptions where they could get an up-close look at different variations in expected sanctions. They believed by doing this they could "solve some fundamental problems in identifying individuals' response to a variation in the severity of punishment" (Drago, Galbati, and Vertova 2007). It is explained in their in-depth study that when a drop in crime rates is experienced, accompanied by an increase in criminal sanctions put in place, there are two possible explanations. First, they explain that "discouragement of criminal behavior is induced

by the increase in its relative price (*the general deterrent effect*); the reduction in crime is mechanically due to the removal of criminals from the community (*the incapacitation effect*)” (Drago, Galbati, and Vertova 2007). This study provides some important insight into how the deterrence effect and the expectation of a change in punishment effects how individuals behave and react in the prison environment. It also helps to explain why and how individuals recidivate after they are released. It all comes down to how the individual weighs the costs and possible benefits of the situation.

Not only does the possible threat of punishment affect how incarcerated individuals act, but also the prison environment itself has a great impact on their actions as well. Prison is an extremely stressful and jolting experience for newcomers. The overall impact of the prison experience is something important to consider when assessing if individuals do or do not recidivate.

According to a study from Bales and Piquero (2012) addressing the impact of imprisonment on recidivism, they found that “imprisonment exerts a criminogenic effect” on inmates while they are incarcerated. In this study Bales and Piquero look at the highly debated topic of the effect of imprisonment on reoffending in regard to a prison diversion program.

This effect of imprisonment is important to understand why and how people recidivate. The effect of imprisonment varies in terms of individuals and in terms of the theory we are discussing. Severity of imprisonment, and severity of anything in general, is a very individual experience. Different people experience stressful situations differently, depending on a multitude of factors. For example, if looking at labeling theory, it can be surmised that, “incarceration serves to increase subsequent offending largely through the external imposition of formal (and

subsequent self-imposed informal) labels that knife off opportunities for prosocial behavior upon release” (Bales and Piquero 2012).

In this study specifically, it was found that there was an “empirical link between imprisonment and recidivism relative to offenders placed on Community Control using regression-based models” and other methods of analysis. In this study they also took a closer look at characteristics of different individuals imprisoned. These characteristics include things like race, gender, age, and type of offense. “Not surprisingly, all the variables significantly influenced the imprisonment decision” (Bales and Piquero 2012). All this goes on to validate the point that imprisonment has a criminogenic effect on inmates. Different individual characteristics an inmate possesses, while imprisoned, may affect their day to day life more than it would have out in society. It makes sense to tie the effects felt from a criminogenic environment, like prison, with the fall of recidivism rates. One could go on to argue that recidivism rates would possibly rise too, but generally the harsher a prison experience the less an individual would be inclined to reoffend and return to that same environment.

Another very important purpose of this study is to further understand the roles that female inmates have compared to their male counterparts, in and out of prison. It is pretty common knowledge what roles females and males occupy in our society. It is believed that the male is generally the breadwinner of the family and his main duty is to provide. On the other hand, it is also believed that the female is the one to take care of the children and the home. These roles have shifted and changed in our society today. However, there is still remnants of these gender stereotypes that not only permeate our society but our prison systems as well.

Along with those roles comes different gender specific needs as well. Male and female entry into the criminal justice system is very different. It can be concluded from this that males and females have different needs pertinent to their life experiences.

In a study done by Elise Barlow, she goes on to explain that “the institution of criminal justice continues to ignore the context of these women’s lives and the reality of their needs.” In discussing specific needs of female prisoners, it is only fair to bring up female pathways to prison as well. Females have very different pathways, or entries, into prison than their male counterparts. Females traditionally come from homes of abuse and flee; this can cause them to get mixed up in drugs or the wrong crowd of people which land them in prison. The current criminal justice system has primarily relied on males committing crime to develop theories and practices, in the process it has almost been forgotten that females commit crimes as well. “Correctional policy claims a gender-neutral stance, ignoring the psychological and social literature differentiating men and women’s criminological pathways. The misinformed nature of the criminal justice system has only exacerbated the problem of mass incarceration of women” (Barlow 2014).

Without providing an excuse for committing crimes, women have had very traumatic experiences that have landed them in prison as have men. Specifically concerning women, traumatic experiences need to be addressed, otherwise others in similar situations will experience the same pain. Without these traumatic experiences addressed, the female incarceration rate will continue to rise. These experiences are gender specific and should be addressed in such a manner, not a one size fits all approach. “Gender specific needs means identifying particular elements that are unique to women using theoretical frameworks and evidence-based research. Due to current research and understanding, most in the field of corrections agree that women

have different needs than men, but the solutions are seen as being the same. These needs are either “not typically seen in men, seen in men but occur at greater frequency in women, or occur in equal frequency among men and women but affect women in uniquely personal and social ways that should reflect in current correctional assessment” (Barlow 2014).

Another important female role, in and out of prison, is the role in family life. Women traditionally have different roles in the household than males. Even though these roles have shifted over the years they still have some of the basic aspects. One thing that has mostly stayed the same is the women’s part in caring for the children.

Even though males today are raising children, there is still a strong relationship between the mother and their children. When it comes time for a mother to go to prison and leave her children behind, this could turn the woman’s whole life upside down. In a study by Gale D. White (2012), she takes a closer look at addressing the needs of female offenders that are incarcerated. White mentions that a majority of female offenders “were living with their children prior to arrest” (2012). This is a seemingly obvious statement, but the fact that most children live with their mothers prior to arrest creates a growing issue in society when these mothers are imprisoned and leaving their children behind. Not only does this affect the mother but affects the child as well. Growing up without a mother is not something these children asked for, but they must deal with the consequences of their mother’s criminal involvement.

Research by White (2012) indicates the need for “gender-responsive programs” in our prison system. Gender-responsive programs are those that are “geared toward the needs of female offenders” (White 2012). Just as males and females have different roles in society and prison, they also have different needs in society and prison. “It has been determined that female offenders have different and unique needs than male offenders” (White 2012). These different

needs of males and females are closely tied to their pathways into prison as well. Women have very different pathways than men into prison, these pathways will not just affect them in prison but out of prison as well. If these issues aren't addressed these women will find themselves up in the same deplorable conditions as before. Not only do these gender specific programs serve a therapeutic aspect, but they also "address life skills such as parenting and job preparedness" (White 2012). These gender specific programs are important in an attempt to lower the rates of females imprisoned. If the system can address these specific needs females have, it can possibly keep them from coming back to prison in the future.

An example of a focus of a gender specific program would be a mother's separation from her children. This separation of mother from child is not only traumatic for the ones involved but also is an increase work for outside individuals as well. This separation actually "constitutes a crisis in our society today, which is manifested in overcrowded state and federal prisons, increased caseloads for the Department of Children and Family Services, the Foster Care System, and families of offenders" (White 2012). When a mother is sent to prison, she is not only harming her relationship with her child, but she is putting extra strain on government departments and resources to somewhat take on her parenting responsibilities for her while she is incarcerated. This shift of responsibility from mother to government funded programs is traumatic for a child, especially one in its early stages of development, and can go on to affect them for the rest of their life. As mentioned before by White, this is a "crisis in our society today" for a multitude of reasons. It is important to address this crisis for the well-being of not only the child, but the mother as well.

This well-being of a women is severely impacted when she is in prison, especially if she was separated from her children. This is a huge stressor for women while imprisoned that affect

their conduct and behavior. Separation from children is one instance that increases severity of imprisonment, therefore affecting a mother's chances of recidivating post release. If a mother is separated from her child, and then upon release she is no longer allowed to have contact with that child because of her record, this could cause some women to break down mentally and reoffend with no hope for the future. Once a mother is separated from her child, she faces the issue of weakened family ties. "The difficulties of separation are exacerbated by a lack of contact" (Bloom and Covington 2003). Some of the struggles that incarcerated mothers experience relating to weakened family ties include, "staying in touch as well as planning for reuniting when they are released" (Riley, Subramaniam, and Swavola 2016). This connection is lost between mother and child and in some instances it may not be repairable.

A major way to combat this case of weakened family ties include visitation. Visitation can be very helpful and not very productive all at the same time. Productivity of visitation depends on the facility. "Although visitation can help sustain the connection between an incarcerated mother and her children – and correlates with a decrease in violence and reduced recidivism – jails do not often have policies or programs that encourage visits" (Riley, Subramaniam, and Swavola 2016). Depending on what type of crime that has been committed by the mother, this could also sever the relationship she has with her child. Depending on the crime she committed, the child could now see their mother in a different light than before. In conclusion, family ties and relationships in general both negatively and positively affect female inmates and their road to reentry.

The type of crime a female commits has a significant effect in how she is sentenced compared to her male counterparts. Going back to societal norms, men and women have different responsibilities and gender expectations that define them. These expectations may be

outdated and one sided, but they have stayed somewhat constant over the years. These norms and expectations are not only true in society but are also present in our prison system as well. The first way this play out in the prison system is in the fact that “when women commit crimes outside of their gender expectations, they receive harsher sentences” (Bloom and Covington 2003). Women in society are expected to behave in certain ways, just because they are women. When a woman commits a crime, it is something that is completely against her gender expectations of being gentle, feminine, and even in some cases motherly. A majority of these crimes are not committed against strangers either, “they are against ex-spouses or current spouses who have abused them in some manner” (Bloom and Covington 2003). Since their act of committing a crime is something that is completely against the idea of womanhood, these women are seen as oddities or outliers in the system and we give them harsher sentences for less serious crimes than men.

We must take into account two important topics when discussing the imprisonment of females, the war on drugs and mandatory minimums. “The passage of harsh mandatory minimums for federal crimes, coupled with new sentencing guidelines intended to reduce racial, economic, and other disparities in the sentencing of men, have distinctly disadvantaged women” (Bloom and Covington 2003). In hopes to be treated equally, the system has ended up putting women at an even greater disadvantage because of the lack of understanding of how policies and guidelines affect males and females differently.

Along with this idea of giving women harsher sentences for crimes committed outside of their respective gender expectations, the flip side also has to be taken into account. The idea that “when women commit more gender specific crimes, they actually receive lighter sentences” (Bloom and Covington 2003). This can be seen when we take the crime of prostitution, as we

know prostitution is a crime that majorly committed by females. Prostitution is not common for all female offenders, but they compose a significant portion of them. When women are taken in for prostitution they are “likely to receive a far less severe punishment or little punishment at all” (Bloom and Covington 2003). If the system were to take a step back and look closely at this example, they would be able to realize that since women are heavily judged in society on how they look and how they please their partner sexually, it is not hard to understand that this crime would be treated more leniently compared to other crimes that are outside of gender expectation. Since these generalizations fall within the female stereotype, it makes sense that society would treat this crime more leniently.

This all ties back to the idea of gender stereotypes and how those stereotypes seep into the criminal justice system. Stereotypes and ideologies that are present in society have a way of affecting every aspect of our lives. How society sees women has also heavily impacted how the criminal justice system sees and treats women. As stated before, “gender stereotypes affect women’s sentence length” (Brennan and Vandenberg 2009).

In a study by Pauline Brennan and Abby Vandenberg highlights “how a female offender’s race/ethnicity influenced how she was portrayed by the media” (Brennan and Vandenberg 2009). Brennan and Vandenberg take a closer look at how female offenders are depicted in mainstream media and how race/ethnicity skew these results even further.

As in the criminal justice system, society is divided by race and ethnicity. This fact is also true for the media. In the study by Brennan and Vandenberg (2009), they found that “stories about white female offenders were more likely to contain excuses for their alleged or actual offenses and were, therefore, more likely to take on an overall favorable tone than stories about minority female offenders” (Brennan and Vandenberg 2009). This leniency attributed to white

female offenders related back to the issues of gender stereotyping in sentencing policies. Not only are minority females already part of a minority due to their race or ethnicity, they are also female which is a minority in itself. These minority females are at an even greater risk of harsher sentences compared to their counterparts who are part of the majority. In conclusion, sentence length and sentencing disparities for gender specific crimes between males and females directly affects female inmates' severity of imprisonment.

Lastly, a final purpose of this study is to examine how friendships and social networks affect a woman during and after her prison experience, thus impacting her chances of success post release. Friendships and social networks are important indicators to how a woman is coping and behaving in prison. These relationships are also a great predictor of her success post release as well.

In their study, Hoan Bui and Merry Morash use interviews with "twenty successful female parolees" to examine "women offenders' relationships with people in their social networks before, during, and after incarceration on their post release desistance from crime" (Bui and Morash 2009). It was useful to their study to use qualitative interviews to get a real sense of what these women go through and how fortunate are the ones who have a strong support system to help them on their road to reentry.

In their study they found that "friendships and social networks while incarcerated, in and outside prison, can serve as means of emotional support and access to resources once released" (Bui and Morash 2009). Anyone who has been imprisoned and has reentered in society would say that access to resources like housing, jobs, and education is something that is very hard to come by. If an individual just released has strong friendships or social networks that can help them gain access to these resources, they are one step closer to a successful reentry. "By gaining

access to these resources, inmates can get access to jobs, educational services and much more post release” (Bui and Morash 2009). Having these strong ties are essential for someone who has just been released, due to the fact that there is such a large stigma surrounding individuals who have been incarcerated in society.

Going back to the topic of friendships, “friendships not only can help inmates materially but also emotionally as well” (Bui and Morash 2009). It is not enough to have the access to resources, but it is also essential to have that emotional component as well. Incarcerated individuals, especially females, have had tough lives leading up to them actually being imprisoned. Their pathways to prison have been rough and that is not something that can just be forgotten. This emotional component is essential to overcoming these deep-rooted issues that incarceration cannot fix. It is not enough to have strong ties outside prison, but it is actually just as important to have strong ties in prison as well. “Strong ties to others while imprisoned serve as a means of maintaining positive emotional well-being” (Bui and Morash 2009). If you have friends or even acquaintances in prison that pick you up when you’re down or stand up for you when no one else will, that is only going to improve your mental and emotional state while imprisoned. In what seems to be a hopeless environment, it is important to have those in your corner who support you.

On the flip side of that, when you have weak ties with friends or other social networks this can also affect your well-being (Bui and Morash 2009). These weak ties may make an inmate’s prison experience seem even more severe than it already is and cause a setback in their reentry process. “Once released from prison these weak ties are not a source of support on the road to reentry” (Bui and Morash 2009). These ties that were once weak will most likely remain weak, especially to someone who is trying to re-enter society and restructure their lives.

As well as friendships and social networks are a source of emotional or material support, they are also “important predictors of women’s success post release” (Bui and Morash 2009). A good example to look at to further explain this topic is the issue of drug addiction. When you have a strong support system with friends or family, it can prevent relapse in the future once released to ensure that an individual is not incarcerated again in the future. This does not only apply to drug addiction but reentry in general. When you have a strong support system your road to reentry will become much more successful.

If an inmate is fortunate enough to have someone who has once been incarcerated in their support system or network, it will actually aid in their reentry. “Having friends or social networks of people who have once been incarnated, but are out living their lives, can serve as a guide for recently released inmates to a successful reentry” (Bui and Morash 2009). Having individuals in one’s support system who have been incarcerated sounds like a recipe for disaster, but if these individuals have successfully reentered society they can serve as great examples for those who are about to go through the same process. There is not a set guide to follow to have a successful reentry, but with someone there who has gone through it they can be a great source of strength for the testing times ahead.

Not only is strong friendships and social networks hard enough to come by, but it is also difficult for those incarcerated to choose the correct friendships and social networks that will benefit them the most. “Friendship choices of female inmates proves important to their success while in prison and post release for limiting incidences of recidivism” (Cerncovich, Giordano, and Holland 2006). If a female chooses the wrong crowd of individuals to associate with, that makes her chances of recidivism that much more likely. This is not only true for friendships, but also romantic relationships as well. The wrong choice of who to associate with could lead these

women down the wrong path. In conclusion, a female offender's friendships and social networks in and out of prison directly affect their success post release.

Research Questions

For this thesis, the existing dataset was utilized to explore further into 1) do family ties and women's specific roles in the family act as a contributing factor to perceived severity of imprisonment, 2) how do women's friendships, social networks, and relationships, in and out of prison, affect their perceived severity of imprisonment and 3) how do disparities in sentence length between female and male inmates affect females perceived severity of imprisonment. These research questions are all intertwined when examining an inmate's perceived severity of imprisonment. Family ties, friendships and social networks, and disparities in sentence length are all factors that play into how a female inmate perceives herself and in turn perceives her environment.

The first question regarding family ties and a women's roles in the family is important to examine because this could have a significant impact on how she acts while she is imprisoned. If she has strong ties to her children and she is a single mother, this could be extremely difficult for her to be away from her children. This separation could cause her to act out and get disciplined, causing her to get more time on her sentence. On the other hand, this separation could cause her to become extremely depressed and disconnected with the world around her which could affect her in the long run even when she is released.

Another contributing factor to behavior and attitude while imprisoned is friendships and social networks. How do women's friendships and social networks, in and out of prison, affect an inmate's perceived severity of imprisonment? This question takes a closer look how a female

offender is supported outside of the prison environment as well as inside. Are these connections outside of prison emotionally and financially supporting her road to reentry or are they ignoring her existence? This also applied to the friendships and social networks within the walls of the prison as well, are these connections there for her while she is imprisoned and keeping her spirits up? These are all important questions that should be examined when deciding the impact friendships and social networks have on a female offender.

The final issue that should be taken into consideration when determining how severe a female offender perceives the prison experience is how do disparities in sentence length between female and male inmates affect this. It is an unfortunate fact that males and females are not sentenced accordingly for committing the same crimes. This has to do with many factors, but specifically how females and males are viewed in society along with their gender roles. These disparities in sentencing can severely affect a female's severity of imprisonment and outlook on the future once they are released from prison.

Strain Theory

Strain theory in this context argues “that individuals use delinquency as a coping mechanism or as a problem-solving activity in response to their inability to achieve certain goals” (Morris et al., 2012). Strain Theory was developed by Robert Agnew in the nineteen nineties, he focused on “negative relations with others and negative experiences, expended on the types of strain that individuals encounter (presentation of negative stimuli, removal of positive stimuli, failure to achieve positive goals), ascribed importance to the emotional reactions that individuals experience as a result of the various strains (e.g., anger, fear, rage, depression), and specified potential coping mechanisms that individuals may use as a way to deal with the

emotional responses that arise from strainful events” (Morris et al., 2012). Strain in any environment can cause you to change your habits or your coping strategies in order to survive. In a study by Morris and others, they hypothesized that “prison-based strain will adversely affect inmates and increase their misconduct” (Morris et al., 2012). This whole idea about adapting to a new environment and the strain it causes on individuals is very prevalent in the prison system and causes individuals to act in ways that are very different than they usually would behave. “It is not difficult to see how GST (general strain theory) is applicable to prison misconduct. Offenders enter prison (itself a strainful event), are presented with a series of strainful events and negative experiences (e.g., loss of freedom, few resources to purchase goods), which in turn likely generates an array of emotions that may ultimately spark misconduct while institutionalized” (Morris et al., 2012).

This strain experienced during prison can also carry on to an individual’s attitude post release as well. In this same study by Morris and others, they examined data from an Ohio prison and their recently released inmates on how they experienced strain in and out of the prison environment. This Ohio prison data was a starting point for their research and took it one step further by using longitudinal data and a sample of inmates from a larger southern prison. They examined from the Ohio data “whether strain associated with imprisonment (e.g., direct victimization, perception of a threatening prison environment, and hostile relationships with correctional officers) affected recidivism and found that one of four types of strain (negative prison environment-where inmates perceived the prison environment to be fearful, threatening, and violent) increased the likelihood of recidivism” (Morris et al., 2012).

They did in fact find in their study that, “prison misconduct is a strong correlate of post-release recidivism” (Morris et al., 2012). This suggest if we want to reduce post-release

recidivism we should aim to “reduce prison strain” (Morris et al., 2012). They do however note that “of course, reducing prison strain is a worthwhile endeavor more generally and its adverse effects are not necessarily limited to a specific group of inmates” (Morris et al., 2012). This simply means that yes reducing prison strain will in turn reduce recidivism post release, but it is easier said than done. There are a lot of variables to consider when working towards this goal, but it is something that we should never stop working toward.

Another important issue to consider when discussing strain theory and how it relates to severity of imprisonment is the topic of how pains of imprisonment interact with the deprivational style of prison. To start out with, the pains of imprisonment include loss of liberty, goods and services, heterosexual relationships, autonomy, and security. As mentioned in the Morris study, strain can be experienced when individuals have a “loss of autonomy, privacy, material goods, services, and are forced to live in overcrowded and oftentimes dilapidated conditions.” Just the loss of these things can cause an individual to experience strain because it is something, they are unaccustomed to. Since prison is already a deprivational environment where you are stripped of common things, these pains of imprisonment cause an individual to experience strain even further. This large increase in strain can affect an individual’s behavior in and out of the prison context.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interaction is essentially a theory focused on how individuals interact within their society. Symbolic interaction is concerned with communication in the sense that it is exchanged through the use of language or symbols. Symbols and language are a very important

aspect of the prison environment in relating individuals to each other or gives individuals a way of defining themselves.

In a study by Michael Phelan and Scott Hunt, they examine tattoos of specific members of prison gangs and relate that to the symbolic interactionism theory (Hunt and Phelan 2011). Hunt and Phelan stress the idea that tattoos make an individual's "self-definition" and how they express themselves to others.

Self-definition in any environment is important, but especially in a prison environment. It matters how one views themselves because, depending on that view, it will affect how they are treated by other inmates. "Tattoos make an individual's self-definition more complete by visually communicating gang membership, status, rank, and person accomplishments; they reflect a person's past career accomplishments and possible future career objectives" (Hunt and Phelan 2011). Depending on how you "self-define" yourself, could have a significant impact on how you experience prison as more or less severe. This symbolic interactionism taking place in the prison setting, "creates an individual's identity and perception of the environment around them" (Hunt and Phelan 2011). The people and groups you choose to associate with and how you express that, could make the prison experience significantly better or worse.

Identity in any context is a complex idea, especially in the prison environment. As stated above, identity is important to be aware and cognizant of in the prison environment. Depending on how an individual defines themselves, that could be directly related to how people treat them in the prison environment. The concept of identity while imprisoned is an "ongoing process that emerges from individual's interpretative and communicative efforts" (Hunt and Phelan 2011). How you communicate with others around you and interpret the prison experience has a direct impact on your "identity" while imprisoned.

Deprivation Model

The deprivation model of prison is a framework that seeks to explain how individuals react to the various forms of deprivation that they experience when they are incarcerated. When an individual is taken from society and placed in prison that is a huge adjustment and changes the way an individual functions day to day. Individuals have the choice to either react or succumb to this new way of living.

One way an individual experiences deprivation in prison, is when they lose their sense of self they have formerly known. "Prison dehumanizes an inmate and strips them of their individuality" (Keller and Wang 2005). An individual is essentially stripped down to a number when imprisoned, they are no longer an individual. An inmate is treated as a part of the masses that make up the prison environment, no longer are they considered an individual with unique traits and characteristics. This stripping of individuality can have a severe impact on how an individual then behaves while they are imprisoned. Stripping of individuality in turn "causes anger or frustration and causes an individual to act out in response to their environment" (Keller and Wang 2005).

Deprivation variables combined have a significant impact on an individual's behavior. Some of these variables could be considered the "pains of imprisonment." Pains of imprisonment include the loss of liberty, goods and services, heterosexual relationships, autonomy, and security. These variables are essential to life and it would be hard to imagine life without these freedoms. Some specific deprivation variables could include "sentence length and limited contact with social units and society in general" (Keller and Wang 2005). The stronger someone experiences these pains of imprisonment, or deprivation variables, the more likely they are to experience prison as more severe than another individual who has not had the same experiences.

Deprivation variables all depend on the individual and how well they cope with stressful situations. These individual differences are one factor that can account for different levels of severity experienced in the prison environment. One factor that may contribute to the prison experience being more severe for women is the fact that female inmates are usually housed further from their homes than men. This distance from their home causes their family to visit them less, exacerbating the severity of their prison experience.

Dependent Concept

In this thesis the topic of severity of imprisonment and its implications will be researched further. This study will look at how the severity of imprisonment will affect recidivism rates post release. How someone experiences prison, as more or less severe compared to others, can have a direct impact on their behavior in and out of prison.

The dependent concept in this research is the perceived severity of imprisonment. In other words, how severe or not severe someone experiences prison is due to a multitude of factors. There is two ways that severity of imprisonment will be measured, by low rates of recidivism and inmate behavior post release.

The first way to measure perceived severity of imprisonment is by low rates of recidivism. “Individuals who experience prison as more severe are less likely in the future to reoffend after they are released” (Raaijmakers et al., 2016). The more severe someone experiences prison, the less likely they will want to return.

The severity of prison acts as a deterrent for individuals who experience prison as more severe, to keep them from reoffending in the future. Raaijmakers, and others in the field, found that “offending decisions are presumed to be a function of the perceived, not the actual costs of

engagement in crime” (Raaijmakers et al., 2016). This simply means that the decision to offend is more concerned with what the individuals perceives not the actual consequences of engaging in the crime. All consequences aside, the decision to commit is more concerned with what the individual perceives in their environment as being important.

The second way to measure perceived severity of imprisonment is by inmate behavior post release. Inside the prison inmate behavior is an important gauge of how the inmate is adapting to the prison experience. If an inmate tends to act out more, for example picking fights with other inmates or disrespecting the guards, they may not have the effective coping mechanisms that would help them through their prison experience. However, being let out of prison brings a whole new host of issues. Issues like housing, employment, and family relations, to name a few.

Once released from prison, the individual may act in accordance with how they experienced the prison environment. With the rate of reentry so high in our country the system needs to take a step back and ask ourselves what is causing such high numbers? In a study by Baer and others in the field, they found that in the last decade “two-thirds of released prisoners are rearrested within three years of release” (2006). This brings an important issue to the forefront, how is prison equipping these individuals while they are incarcerated to be productive members of society? As mentioned before, the more severe an individual perceives prison the less likely they are to reoffend in the future (Raaijmakers et al., 2016). However, this study by Baer and other colleagues found that even though most inmates experience prison as severe, they are still likely to be reincarcerated post release (2006). This begs the question; how can we alter our prison structure to help these people succeed in their road to reentry?

Many individuals once released from prison, are returned back to the homes or the neighborhoods that they have committed the crimes they were incarcerated for. These areas are breeding grounds for crime and wrongdoing, especially for someone recently released from prison. These areas may not be dangerous in nature, but they are not suitable to meet the needs of those recently incarcerated. “Social and economic disadvantage often characterize these communities, compounding the challenges and burdens that this population brings to bear when they return home” (Baer et al., 2006). Most of the time, these areas are the only places these individuals have to go to and they are not productive for someone on their road to reentry. The residents in these communities are most likely friends or in close contact with one another and affect how one another act. “Research also suggests that high rates of incarceration and reentry of community residents through the revolving door of the criminal justice system may further destabilize these communities” (Baer et al., 2006). This brings up the question, were these individuals better off in prison?

Reentry is a long and arduous process, that can take up a good portion of a person’s life. A successful reentry really counts on the individual and their drive to complete this process, along with their access to resources. Baer and colleagues (2006) found that, some inmates who invest their energy into their reentry successfully acquire housing and a stable job. The key word here is some inmates, not all inmates have the drive or support to achieve a successful reentry back into society. Challenges individuals face upon reentry include jobs, health, housing, substance use, family ties, communities, public safety and community supervision. If we want to shorten this list of obstacles individuals face once released, we need to change the way we are looking at and framing this issue.

Hypotheses

The overarching research problem that is explored in this thesis is focused on the factors that contribute to a female inmate's perceived severity of imprisonment. This can be examined by taking a closer look at how that perceived level of severity affects inmates once they are released from a facility. How does a former inmate adapt to new surroundings and interact with the rest of society? Another focus of this thesis is to discuss how female inmates experience prison differently from men due to an array of interrelated factors. Especially, concerning the responsibilities women have that differ from men pre and post release. How do these roles female once had before they were incarcerated carry over to when they are released? How are these responsibilities amplified or diminished once inmates are released from prison and how do gender roles impact that?

Due to the existing research, I hypothesize that 1) individual family relations will be significantly related to an individual's perceived severity of imprisonment. Regarding relationships, I hypothesize that 2) friendships and relationships in prison can significantly impact how an inmate behaves in and out of prison. Finally, regarding the effect of sentence length, I hypothesize that 3) the longer the sentence, the more the individual will perceive their sentence as severe.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Sample

The data for this study was collected during qualitative interviews with female inmates during the Understanding Incarceration and Re-Entry Experiences of Female Inmates and their Children: The Women's Prison Inmate Networks Study (WO-PINS). Researchers from the Criminology department conducted and collected the interview data that will be utilized in this study. In this sample female inmates are chosen from the prison population and asked various questions ranging from their time in prison, social connections in prison, family in and out of prison, plans for life after prison, and many more. This is an existing dataset and I will not be collecting my own data in this study. I will be utilizing the data that was collected and conducted from the department researchers. The reason why I will be using existing data is due to the fact that it takes a significant amount of time to gain access into a prison setting to collect my own data. The waiting period to just receive access to a certain facility would itself not leave for enough time to thoughtfully analyze the data. There however is an advantage to using existing data, this data that has already been collected allows for more time to analyze and completely understand the data.

This data collection done by department researchers took place in a women's prison in Muncy Pennsylvania, with help from the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections to gain a better understanding of the prison and re-entry experience of female inmates. These women were chosen to be interviewed because they were in the time period of three months before their release. This project will fill in some of the areas of female inmate's experience to incarceration that has not gotten as much attention.

Description of Sample

This project aims to gain a better understanding of a couple important topic areas concerning female inmates. The first of these areas being “the absence of even basic information on the modern conditions of confinement, the potential heterogeneity in incarceration effects across individual and institutional contexts, and the limited understanding of any association between maternal incarceration and child well-being.” The part of the project that will be focused on is phase two. Phase two consisted of semi-structured interviews, that were qualitative in nature. These women who were interviewed, within three months of their release, were asked a series of questions by the interviewer ranging from topics concerning conditions inside prison to their life when they are released. This data touched on a lot of issues that these female inmates were facing. The data not only talked about the physical and mental aspects of imprisonment, but the social element as well.

Using STATA (Statistic/Data Analysis) software, a more in-depth breakdown of the sample was provided. The number of respondents in the study was sixty-three in total. Of these sixty-three respondents, the data provided a more detailed breakdown on the respondents’ age, race, and visitation information. The average age of respondents in the sample was around forty, with the age range between twenty-two and sixty. The race of the respondents was overwhelming white. Of the respondents sampled, fifty-two were White or Caucasian, eight were Black or African American, two were Hispanic or Latino/a, and only one was classified as Other or Mixed Race. Of all these respondents in the study, none were serving a life sentence. Another important aspect that was highlighted in the data, was number of visits in the inmate received in the last six months. Respondents in the studied averaged around two visits in the last six months, which looking ahead may impact their perceived severity if they have a particularly

long sentence. With all that taken into account, the data provides a better look at the demographic makeup of the inmates being studied in this sample.

The dataset of this sample that was viewed was broken down into different nodes based on the topics of questions asked. The nodes were then coded for frequency in regard to the answers that these female inmates gave. The first node in the study is titled as “expectations for reentry”. This is further broken down into the following sections: expectation for interactions with parole, expectation for health care, expectation for reincarceration, expectation for remaining drug free, expectation of social relationships, expected obstacles, feels prepared to re-enter, healthcare, plan for living situation, plans for education and plans for employment.

The next major node was titled “in prison”. This topic was then further broken down into the following sections: conditions of confinement, general prison experience, physical and mental health in prison, programs in prison, social connections on the inside, social connections with the outside and victimization in prison.

Following this section, the next major section was “interesting quotes”. This section simply mentioned quotes that stood out to the interviewer while conducting the interview and individuals who coded the data. The last section the data touched on was “pathways into crime”. This was then further broken down into the following sections: crime committed during prison stay, crime committed prior to current prison stay, emotional connections to family, family history, life-course history adulthood, life-course history childhood, and reason for crimes committed (current and past).

The extent of questions asked to these female inmates covered essentially all major areas of their lives while imprisoned. The data not only explored life in prison but also displayed how prison is affecting these women’s lives outside as well. If one were to read this data and nothing

else, it would give a practical view of the multitude of issues that affect female inmates and how those issues will have implications post release.

Independent Variables

The first independent concept that will be explored is the effect of family ties and relationships on perceived severity of imprisonment. How do gendered roles and responsibilities affect how severe or not severe the inmate perceives their prison experience? This concept may have an effect in either direction depending on the inmate and their individual characteristics. The inmate may have trouble staying motivated and out of trouble in prison with the thought of her children growing up without her. On the other hand, she may take this as an opportunity to really better herself and try to become the best mother to her children she can be once she is released.

The concept of family ties and relationships can be measured in this dataset on the level of support these individuals received from family members or loved ones upon their release. One inmate in the study discussed how important it was for her to stay in contact with the individuals she met while incarcerated and how her mother would help her stay in contact with these friends. However, this type of support is not true for all inmates. According to one inmate, “the hardest part is when you are just out. A lot of people don’t have the support system. Not a lot of people have it in their head already, as soon as I get out of here, I’m getting messed up.” This unfortunately is the mindset for most individuals leading up to their release. Even if the individual does not feel a sense of support for their release they fall back easily into old habits and patterns that led them to prison in the first place. It was also prevalent in the study that some of these individuals did not have any connections to people who were not a part of their family.

This brings up another important issue, if an individual's family members are the ones who led them into a life of a crime or are not supportive of their release how is this individual supposed to effectively reenter society?

This leads us to the second independent concept that will be explored in this data, which is the effect of friendships and social network involvement on an inmate's perceived severity of imprisonment. Friendships and social networks are as important in prison as they are important outside. Friendships and social networks are vital to an inmates emotional and even physical well-being while they are incarcerated.

This concept can be measured in this dataset by the impact that these friendships or "prison families" have on an inmate and their time incarcerated. This concept can be measured by the responses from inmates in the study who reference how these prison families and friendships helped create a more welcoming atmosphere while incarcerated. This welcoming atmosphere can prove to directly impact an inmate's perceived severity of imprisonment. A significant number of inmates in the data mentioned that they would make attempts to stay in contact with the friends they made while incarcerated. Even though it is hard to stay in contact with someone who has been released, the majority of responses to interview questions was that individuals would still make the effort. This is because, according to one inmate, the friends they made on the inside are "some of the best people I've met even out of prison." Another very important type of social network in prison is the prison family. This structure of the prison family gives its members something that they are missing while imprisoned or may even be missing outside of prison. These family structures give individuals people who they can count on and trust while imprisoned. Being a member of a prison family is a great sign of respect. To be given a role in one of these families means that other individuals look up to you and trust you

more than others. An example of this in the dataset is one woman who was dubbed the grandma or “momma” of one prison family. This woman recognized that this was out of respect and that respect was showcased by giving her that important role. She had mentioned that this does not bother her being called grandma or momma in this scenario. These families are just one form of social networks that female can be involved in while imprisoned. Other forms of social networks can be work groups, religious groups, cell mates, friends, and many more.

The third and final independent concept that will be discussed is the sentence length of an individual and how that relates to perceived severity of imprisonment. How does the length of someone’s prison stay affect how severe or not they perceive their prison experience? A longer prison stay could have adverse effects on the individual and cause them to act out or rebel to the prison system. A longer sentence could also affect the support system you have when you return back to society, thus impacting the success of your reentry. A shorter sentence length could result in a desire for the individual to get their act together and behave while they are imprisoned, as to not be in a similar situation in the future. Both these are heavily reliant on the individual and their specific coping mechanisms. Two individuals may very well have the same length of prison stay but may be completely different personality wise. This difference could have a significant effect on how severe they perceive their prison experience.

This concept can be measured in the dataset by examining the responses from participants pertaining to questions and concerns they raise about the societies to which they are returning. Since some women’s sentences are so long, it is their concern that their former households will no longer be able to support them in their reentry. Depending on the family which these women are returning to, if any at all, they may not be able to support these women in their parole attempts or in their attempts at finding a job. A long sentence not only puts a strain

on the individual incarcerated but on her relationships with others outside of prison. If the support system in which a woman is returning to post incarceration is not supportive and willing to help in the reentry process, the women presents much higher risks of returning to old habits. Sadly, a lot of the families of those incarcerated have moved on with their lives and are no longer concerned with the incarcerated individual.

Another way in which the idea of sentence length can be examined in this study is the concept of control. After being incarcerated for so long these individuals forget what it is like to have control over their lives and the choices they make. For so long these women have been told what to do every minute of every day, now upon their release they gain this sense of control back and for some this can cause them to return to old habits. One participant in the study mentions this idea of control and how she feels about it upon release, she states “I am (prepared) but I’m scared. It’s nerve wracking, because no matter how well I do in a controlled environment, in the past I wouldn’t. But as soon as I get a little control back.” Since most of these women have never truly learned what to do with the control they have over their lives, upon release they are put back into a never-ending cycle of past habits.

One final important aspect to examine concerning sentence length and its impact on severity of imprisonment is the concept of time and how inmates choose to spend that time. A long sentence entails an individual to have a spend amount of time with themselves. This solitary time with one’s self allows for a lot of self-reflection and self-evaluation. One participant in the study mentions how the time “gives individuals a lot of time to reflect.” This same participant brings up the idea that when she is at home, she is always worrying about everyone else and not herself. She uses this prison stay as a time to reflect on who she is and what she has done. This reflection and coming to terms with one’s self is crucial to the reentry process. If once released

from prison you have not come to terms with your crime and not taken responsibility for your actions, what is to say you will not reoffend in the future? Taking agency for one's actions is an important step in recovery, it helps the individual accept what has happened and move on from it.

Dependent Variables

The dependent variable in this study is concerned with the perceived severity of imprisonment experienced by the inmate. This perceived severity can be explained by how severe or not an individual classifies their experiences with the pains of imprisonment and how situational factors play into those experiences. Three main way to measure this severity of imprisonment include relationships with family while incarcerated, friendships and social networks while incarcerated, and sentence length.

The severity of imprisonment that is experienced by an inmate can be measured by the individual's closeness to their family, friends and social networks. Another way to measure this is to take into account their sentence length for the specific crime they committed and relate that to their overall prison experience. The dataset utilized in this study touches on these specific factors and how individual respond to those factors. The questions from interview respondents that related to family ties, friendships, relationships, and the effect of sentence length will give a background of the individual and their specific responses to various circumstances in prison. This will also give us a sense how sentence length plays a role in the relationships that individuals have with others outside of prison. Probably the most striking and worthwhile question to address is concerning the sense of identity one loses while incarcerated. This loss of identity can severely impact one's perceived severity of imprisonment on multiple levels. This

can present us with an array of answers depending on the individual and their specific coping mechanisms and connections within prison. This question is useful because it gives a perspective that is unique to the participant and can help in explaining why “perceived severity” is a majorly individual experience and cannot take on a one size fits all approach.

Control Variables

Some important control variables that are introduced and will be vital to examining the relationship between females and their imprisonment experience are race, age, education. These variables are all important to control for because it rules out different explanations for perceived severity of imprisonment that will not be addressed in this study. However, these variables have been somewhat prominent in the research that has been done for this project and controlling for them will help narrow the scope of my research question.

Race is an important variable to control for in this scenario because race is an especially important variable that contributes to individuals’ pathways into prison. When we control for race in this situation and essentially take race out of the equation. This will eliminate the implications of race to allow us to focus on other factors that lead to severity of imprisonment, not so much the factors that lead someone to be imprisoned in the first place.

Age is another important variable to control for in this scenario. If we disregard age in this discussion, we are taking out the argument that has to do with aging prisoners and how that affects an individual’s experience. Age is an important factor to consider, but in this context the study is looking at personal characteristics and characteristics of the environment of prison to explain why some experience prison as more or less severe than others. Age is an inherent characteristic of an individual that they cannot control for, but it does in turn affect how they are

treated in a prison environment. It is an important topic for future discussion but will not be discussed in depth in this thesis.

The last variable that is important to control for in this context is education. The access to education in and out of prison is a highly debated subject that leaves some better off than others. This disparity causes some individuals to be more likely to be imprisoned than others. In this case since the access to quality education is so dispersed, this is another variable that will be controlled for in this study.

Analysis Methods

The method of analysis used in this study is qualitative in nature, as to accurately understand the qualitative semi-structured interviews produced from the data. Descriptive and qualitative analysis methods are used to gain an understanding into how these women are responding to the prison environment and their thoughts concerning reentry. Descriptive statistics are also used in this study to give a general overview to the important features in question. By using descriptive statistics, it will allow for general summaries to be provided concerning the measures being used and the sample being studied. Graphic representations, along with the other forms of analysis, of the data are also used to help the reader get a full understanding of the data set and how it relates to the outcomes.

Chapter 4

Results

Review of the Hypotheses

The utilization and examination of the data was to serve the purpose of understanding the perceived severity of imprisonment of the female inmate. It was also used to examine the various factors that impact this perceived severity. Due to the important role of family ties and relationships in one's life, I hypothesize that there is a link between amount of time spent with those family members or other relationships and the perceived severity of imprisonment (Hypothesis 1). I also hypothesize that the friendships and social networks of female inmates directly impact their severity of imprisonment (Hypothesis 2). Lastly, I hypothesize that an inmate's sentence length has a direct impact on severe they perceive their prison experience (Hypothesis 3).

Hypothesis one: I hypothesize that individual family relations will be significantly related to the perceived severity of imprisonment. **Supported**

Hypothesis two: I hypothesize that friendships in prison can significantly impact how an inmate behaves in prison and also their behavior out of prison. **Supported**

Hypothesis three: I hypothesize that the longer the prison sentence, the more the individual will perceive their sentence as severe. **Supported**

After utilizing the research database, access to qualitative interviews of female inmates, existing scholarly research and established criminological theories there has been support shown for the hypotheses mentioned above. In regard to hypothesis one, there was information in the existing dataset to support this particular hypothesis. Hypothesis one relates to the impact of family relations on the individual incarcerated. It was hypothesized that relationships individuals had with their family members would significantly impact their prison experience and in turn their perceived severity. There was information found in the dataset to reinforce this statement.

Probably one of the most important aspects of an individual's experience while imprisoned is a strong support system. Most of the time this support system is family members and close friends. If an individual does not have a strong support system, they are likely to fall back into old patterns that led them to be incarcerated in the first place. One inmate specifically referenced how this lack of a support system affected her time incarcerated. This particular inmate mentioned how a lack of support upon release is the hardest part and occupies your thoughts up until the time you are released. With the thought of a lack of support looming in an inmate's mind, it starts to cause you to second guess yourself and your success upon release. With all that in mind, there was significant support for this particular hypothesis in the existing data.

Following along with that, hypothesis two specifically mentioned how friendship and social networks affect how inmates act in and out of prison. Friendship and social networks proved to be an integral part of an inmate's prison experience. On many occasions the prison family and friendships inmates had was their most stable and reliable source of support. In turn, these friendships and social networks affected how individuals acted and even shaped their sense of identity. One inmate specifically discussed in her interview how in prison you are just a

number. When you do actually form these friendships and social networks, they give you a sense of identity while incarcerated. These friendships and social networks give individuals a sense of community, something that they are lacking while incarcerated. With this information taken into account, this shows strong support for hypothesis two.

In regard to hypothesis three concerning how the length of the prison sentence effects the individuals perceived severity of imprisonment, this particular hypothesis was proven to be supported. From the data and existing research, the idea that is expressed is that the longer the sentence the less certain the individual is about life post release. This uncertainty about the future presents itself within the individual as a great source of anxiety. Will their family still support them, will their children be able to live with them again, and will they have a job or a to return to? These are just a few of the questions that the individual is bombarded with day in and day out. This anxiety and uncertainty about the future affects the individual's time as an inmate. This uncertainty and stress may cause the individual to experience prison as more severe than someone who has a home to return to with a supportive family or spouse waiting for them to aid them in their reintegration.

While utilizing the NVivo software, specifically the text query function to analyze patterns in female responses, this is where support for hypotheses three was mainly found. The text query function takes a specific word or phrase that it is entered by the researcher and codes the interviews for patterns or matches for the particular phrase entered. Not only does it bring up those results, but it also organizes results to address what these individuals thought was stressful about their experience in particular, in other words what was their individual source of stress while imprisoned. Some interesting areas found during this text query analysis was first, that stress related to imprisonment and wanting to be released causes individuals to age more rapidly

than normal. According to one inmate who mentioned this in her interview, she states that “the system let her down.” This same inmate mentions how the hardest part for her is to keep her family and daughter waiting for her to return home. This particular inmate’s situation and her eagerness to be released caused her to age prematurely due to stress. Another inmate mentions how the mere stressfulness of the situation triggered her seizures while incarcerated. This particular inmate states that due to her lack of sleep, sudden fire alarms, overall stress related to incarceration, and other stressful things she had more seizures while incarcerated than before she was incarcerated. The stress of imprisonment, as depicted in the two previous examples, clearly has not only psychological but physical and emotional effects to individuals waiting to be released. The concept of stress, as well as the severity of imprisonment, is a highly individual experience that is dependent on who you are as a person and your specific coping strategies.

Implications for Theory

As for implications for theory, it is important to recognize the impact that family, friendships, social networks, and sentence length all have on an inmate and their perceived severity of imprisonment. Perceived severity of imprisonment is an important topic to study in general because it has been shown that severity impacts conduct and behavior. Perceived severity also has lasting impacts on the individual and their relationships outside of prison. In earlier parts of this study strain theory, symbolic interactionism, and the deprivation model were all discussed in regard to the theoretical implications of these research questions.

Strain theory deals with individual’s experience with negative stimuli and their coping mechanisms that they use deal with the situation. The prison experience in general is the negative stimuli presented to an individual and their specific behavior or conduct is an individual’s coping

mechanisms. Each individual experiences prison differently, this overall relates to their prison experience and life outside of prison. Implications for theory should look more closely at an individual's coping mechanisms and how those coping mechanisms explain their perceived severity of imprisonment.

The next theory that was referenced was symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism in this situation is essentially how an individual reacts and relates to their specific environment. This can be seen in prison tattoos, how individuals express themselves while imprisoned, and who individuals associate with. In the research this was present in the prison families that were discussed in the qualitative interviews. These prison family's individuals were a part of defined who they were and how they acted while imprisoned. How individuals interact with their environment says a lot about who they are as a person and how they adapt to situations. This is an important area to address in future theoretical contexts because how an individual interacts with their environment while imprisoned speaks to how they will adapt to the world after prison. Is there anything prison facilities can do to help individuals interact better with their prison environment, to better relate to society post release?

The last theory referenced in previous section was the deprivation model. The deprivation model speaks to how individuals interact with the forms of deprivation they experience while incarcerated. Being imprisoned is a significant shock to individuals who have never been incarcerated before. You are taking someone from the environment they have possibly known for their whole life and injecting them into a situation unlike anything they have experienced before. It is important to study the deprivation model and how that relates to an individual prison experience because further knowledge on this topic could improve the prison facility and their operations. With understanding this theory and how individuals experience different forms of

deprivation, the prison facility could work to better address how individuals deal with deprivation inside and outside of prison. This could mean offering individuals opportunities to better their coping skills and technical skills. Overall, this could improve an individual's experience post release and the type of person they become.

Study Limitations

One major limitation of this study is the fact that there is a lack of racial diversity present. The sample that is being examined here is overwhelmingly White. When the sample is, for the most part, White and minorities are being overrepresented this poses a problem for accurately understanding this data. While examining the data it was broken down by ID number, unit, age, race, visits, offense type and other defining characteristics. From examining the results of the data, we see that fifty-two of the sixty-four participants were White or Caucasian, while eight were Black or African American, two were Hispanic or Latino/a, and only one was classified as other or mixed race. The minorities in the dataset were overrepresented in the results, while in reality the more than half of the inmates were white.

If these minorities are underrepresented in the sample, we are not getting an accurate look and understanding of the sample. The sample should be taken as it is, not construed to represent one minority more than another. Not only does this skew our understanding of the dataset but it also reinforces stereotypes about certain minority groups that we have without admitting. If a certain minority group is overrepresented, we find ourselves believing that this minority is more criminal than the other, even if that may not be the case. Overrepresentation is risky in dataset analysis and should be avoided as much as possible. May it be overrepresentation or

underrepresentation, both are equally damaging to the specific group and our overall understanding of the dataset.

Areas to address for Further Research

For future research, it is important to look at future datasets more representatively of minorities in comparison to those who are white. With a more comprehensive and inclusive dataset the experience, or perceived severity, of individuals of a multitude of races can be better understood. If we focus on only one or two races in our research, other races are being included and the specific forms of oppression they experience are being excluded as well. It is important to recognize not all races experience prison the same and that race has a significant impact on an individual's perceived severity. In the end, this study like many others before it, are an attempt to better understand the prison experience, the challenges that arise with it, and the ways in which individuals adapt.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

With all the information listed in this study, it is safe to say that there are many factors that affect an individual and their perceived severity of imprisonment. Three main areas that affects an individual's perceived severity of imprisonment addressed in this study are family, friends and social networks, and sentence length. This is a question that is always evolving and there is information regarding this topic still being discussed to this day.

This is an important question not only for the individual's experience, but for the criminal justice system in general. With females occupying a rising segment of the prison population, these are important questions that should continue to be addressed. If the rate of females incarcerated in this period of time is to decrease, there needs to be more inclusive studies and more attention payed to the many factors that directly impact and individual perceived severity if imprisonment. There should be more attention regarded to this segment of the prison population to address the increasing rates of incarceration in the criminal justice system as a whole.

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