

Book Review: Motherhood after Incarceration: Community Reintegration for Mothers in the Criminal Legal System.

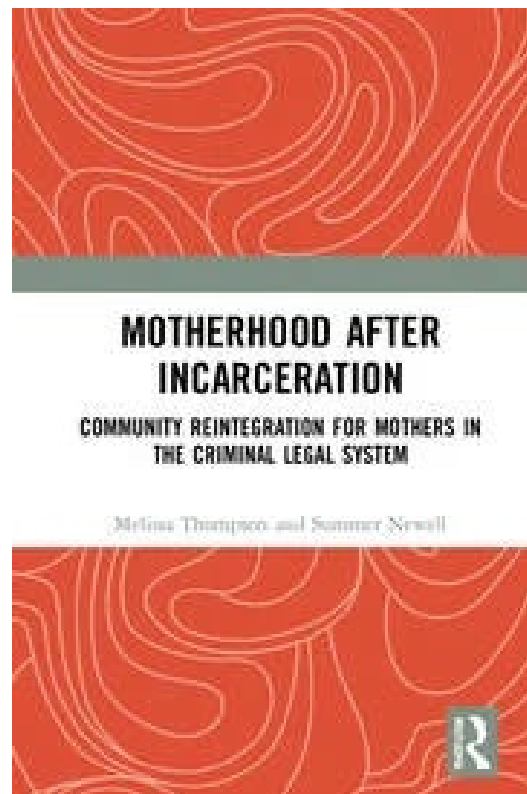
By Melissa Thompson, and Summer Newell
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Reviewed by Cheryl Botello

This book explores the relationships of mothers with their children after periods of incarceration, and how motherhood specifically affects a woman's reintegration into society. Noting that previous studies on offender reintegration had primarily been male dominated, the authors focus their study on the increased rate of women incarcerated in the US, a majority of which are mothers to children aged 18 or younger.

The book presents the findings of longitudinal interviews with 39 former prisoners, conducted in Oregon, USA, between 2010 and 2015. Some women were interviewed up to three times, which enabled the authors to review and assess the various stages in the reintegration process the women experienced. The study focused on the mothers' post-release relationships with their children, and the obstacles affecting their reintegration into the community. These included re-establishing the maternal relationships with their children, and also broader financial, emotional, and behavioural issues.

Each interview is introduced through the use of a vignette summarising the interviewee's story. These vignettes set the state to grasp the kind of struggles formerly imprisoned mothers experience, upon re-entering into the community and



trying to resume relationships with their children. These struggles are compounded by other issues, such as unemployment and lack of adequate or safe housing conditions, which exacerbate the difficulties both mothers and their children face. Extended family relationships often constitute a further complication to the reintegration process, as many women recount trying to avoid contact with family members or close friends who continue to partake in criminal activities.

After an introductory chapter, the book opens by outlining the specific difficulties mothers experience when imprisoned and, subsequently, upon release from prison. Each chapter thus describes the experiences of both mothers who did regain custody of their children upon release and those who did not. The interviews shed light on the stress experienced by the mothers and by their children, during and after these women's imprisonment. The book also highlights the social support available to them, such as family, partners, and parole officers; the latter, however, often fall short of enabling a proper reintegration into society, at times even representing a hindrance to that. The interviews further highlight stories of abuse, as 90% of the participants reported suffering physical abuse, while 69% reported experiencing sexual abuse in either childhood or adulthood. The foster care system, whilst providing an element of safety for the children, often is also a source of stress for those mothers, who, for example, worry their children may become too attached to the carers. Chapter 7 highlights issues of intersectionality, as race and gender compound the difficulties African American and Latino women experience in regaining custody of their children upon release. Interestingly, the authors note that incarcerated men are mostly exempted by the challenges women face upon release.

The book shows that, despite their desire to re-establish their relationships with their children, many mothers were unable to live with them. A number of participants had legal custody of their children, yet did not live with their children nonetheless, due to other issues (e.g., housing). Often, these mothers realised that they needed to focus on bettering themselves before being emotionally capable of also coping with caring for their children – something which had not been clearly identified in earlier literature on the topic.

The authors argue that motherhood should be emphasised as a positive rehabilitation motivator for prisoners who are mothers, together with additional

resources such as appropriate housing arrangements, employment training, parenting classes, and mental health support for both mothers and children, especially after lengthy separations. The authors stressed that investments in these areas would lead to a higher rate of reintegration into society for mothers, and a subsequent reduction in recidivism. As Tabitha, one of the women interviewed in the book, says when asked what motivates her to fulfil her probation requirements, “I think I do it for the fact that I’m a mother and I don’t want to be a drug addict that just does whatever she wants. I think a lot of my life is just being a mom, so that’s kind of the motivating”.

About the reviewer:

Cheryl Botello MBA, M.Phil. is a PhD Candidate and Sessional Academic at Edith Cowan University. Her PhD research is a narrative analysis of yarns with former Aboriginal female prisoners. She is a mother of 3 and has lived experience of the WA corrections system.