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Second Chance for Women Parole Preparation Project

Parole and Female Offenders: A Literature Review

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Table of Contents

Introduction: Parole Outcomes of Female Offenders 1
Challenges to Successful Reentry 1
 Housing..... 2
 Employment..... 2
 Access to Healthcare and a Continuation of Rehabilitative Care 2
Assessment Tools 3
Racial Disparities..... 4
Current Parole Preparation Programs..... 5
Ancillary Benefits of Parole Preparation 5
 Goal-Setting 6
 Self-Reflection and Journaling..... 6
 Life Story 7
Limitations 8
Conclusion 8
References 9

Introduction: Parole Outcomes of Female Offenders

Since the late 20th century female incarceration has steadily increased and sharply compared to males (Beck, 2000). The number of females under community supervision also paralleled the sharp increase in female incarceration, particularly for females convicted of nonviolent offenses (Bloom & Covington, 2004; Carmichael et al., 2005). In 2016, over 4.5 million people were under community supervision and women comprised 25% of those under supervision (Kaeble, 2018). Additionally, over half of formerly incarcerated women are rearrested within 3 years of release (Deschenes et al., 2007).

Research suggests incarcerated women need a different set of support mechanisms than men. Yet, justice-involved women often receive services designed for men (Cain, 1990; Holtfreter & Morash, 2003). This practice gap has also resulted in the lack of evidence-based programs that address the needs of incarcerated women. Some of these needs include addressing trauma stemming from physical and sexual abuse, substance abuse, prostitution, mental health disorders, and financial responsibilities to their children (Carmichael et al., 2005). Understanding the unique rehabilitative needs of female parolees is important for desistance. Women parolees will presumably have a greater chance at reintegrative success if all pertinent rehabilitative needs are met.

Parole packet programs have been implemented with the intent to aid incarcerated individuals through the parole process¹. Parole packets serve as a blueprint for how each parolee plans to navigate the process of reentry once released. Parole packet programs facilitate the construction of necessary documents required to show a parole board that an incarcerated person is ready for release and not a threat to public safety. This review examines notable challenges to successful reentry, the assessment tools for developing treatment plans, a few current parole preparation programs, and the ancillary benefits of parole preparation packet programs.

Challenges to Successful Reentry

Parolees face a number of challenges as they return to their communities. Some notable barriers to a successful reentry include finding and securing suitable housing, employment, and health and rehabilitative services upon release. These are important factors to consider in the preparation of parole packets. Parole packets typically include plans for a parolee's housing, employment, health, and rehabilitative care to be provided upon release. A breakdown in providing any of these essentials can affect a parolee's likelihood for successful reentry. This sheds light on the need to establish a stable, reliable, and sustainable reentry process. Studies cited in this section are not all related to entirely-female parolee populations; however, the barriers discussed reflect the experiences of women navigating the process of parole. There is a noticeable lack of volume in literature focusing on female correctional populations, so this broadening of the literature was deemed necessary to capture all of the challenges to reintegration.

¹ The range of existing parole packet programs consists primarily of parole toolkits or other parole materials accessible online (see "Current Parole Preparation Programs" section on p. 4). To date, there are no Maryland-specific parole programs that provide direct guidance and advocacy through the parole process.

Housing

One of the most basic needs of all reentering citizens is having safe and secure housing upon release. After release, formerly-incarcerated individuals are more vulnerable to homelessness, a condition that in itself has criminogenic and adverse health impacts (Petersilia, 2003). Scholars have long touted the positive effect that housing has on parole outcomes (Lutze et al., 2013). Securing stable housing can also affect other reintegrative success measures, such as employment, mental health, substance abuse, and family support (Bradley et al., 2001). Despite these known benefits of housing, many parolees face discrimination and stigmatization due to their criminal record, making it more difficult for this vulnerable population to fulfill their housing needs (Herbert et al., 2015).

Employment

Research also emphasizes the positive effects of employment on the success of reentry among parolees.² Gainful employment provides a path to financial stability and structure that prevents reoffending (Meredith et al., 2007). Research consistently shows parolees that do not have consistent employment are more likely to re-offend (Uggen, 2000; Wang et al., 2010). A qualitative study of 60 female parolees revealed that economic stability is one of the biggest self-identified barriers to reentry (Johnson, 2014). Although the research is clear on the effects of employment, parolees tend to have more difficulty gaining access to employment and the associated benefits when compared to people without criminal records. People who have a criminal record face considerable stigma in the hiring process (Pager, 2003; Western, 2006). When compared to the general public, parolees also have disproportionately low levels of education and skills required for higher-paying jobs (Visher et al., 2008). Additionally, formerly incarcerated individuals return to poor communities that are often characterized by poverty, crime, and a scarcity of employment opportunities (Hipp et al., 2011; Chamberlain et al.; 2016). The effects of poor neighborhood conditions on employment outcomes are felt intensely by those who also have a criminal record and often do not have the social connections that can help facilitate access to employment (Pager, 2003; Berg & Huebner, 2011; Cherney & Fitzgerald, 2016).

When compared to their male counterparts, female ex-offenders also statistically face more difficulty when trying to find employment (Zarch & Schneider, 2007). Female ex-offenders also tend to make less money than males, and this struggle is often compounded when they are also the primary caregiver for their children (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999). Women also face challenges in obtaining high-paying jobs, such as those jobs in healthcare, because it can be difficult for convicted felons to get hired into these positions (Petersilia, 2003).

Access to Healthcare and a Continuation of Rehabilitative Care

There are several co-occurring health needs of parolees that one must consider, as these needs can impact the likelihood of one's success upon reentry. Parolees have disproportionately high rates of physical and mental health disorders when compared to the general public (Beck, 2000;

² For a detailed look at employment and justice involved women, see Flower, 2010: <https://nicic.gov/employment-and-female-offenders-update-empirical-research>

Osher et al., 2012). Many of their conditions were present during incarceration, so this points to a need for a continuum of care once released. However, many parolees face considerable difficulty in accessing affordable health care, and these difficulties tend to overlap with the struggle to secure stable employment (Marlow et al., 2010). Although the passing of the Affordable Care Act in 2010 addressed this barrier to an extent, many states (primarily those with relatively high poverty rates), opted out of the nonelderly adult Medicaid expansion, significantly impacting many parolees' eligibility (Espinosa & Regenstein, 2014). This population of offenders, who already have disproportionately high rates of health issues, can be further impacted by the ways that their disabilities block access to employment opportunities (Richardson & Flower, 2014).

The barriers to health care access have even more adverse effects in the population of incarcerated women, who are already vulnerable to unfavorable health conditions. Incarcerated women are more likely to have a history of physical and sexual abuse (Crawford, 1990; Norris et al., 2002). Many incarcerated women are also dealing with the effects of past trauma, whether it be childhood trauma or domestic abuse experienced in adulthood (Norris et al., 2002). This history of abuse is related to the prevalence of depression and PTSD, both of which are high in female correctional populations. This history of abuse also affects the likelihood of drug use in an attempt to "self-medicate" to cope with adverse experiences (Chesney-Lind, 2000). Substance abuse in itself is a health risk, but it can also lead to other severe health risks related to brain and organ function (Mann et al., 2005). It is also well known that substance abuse is related to one's likelihood to offend and re-offend (Schram et al., 2006). When compared to the general public, the prevalence of substance abuse problems is higher among parolees, many of which were incarcerated due, at least in part, to their substance abuse problem (Fearn et al., 2016). One's contact with the criminal justice system can also intensify existing health problems (Nkansah-Amankra et al., 2013).

It is clear that female parolees have many challenges related to housing, employment, and healthcare upon release. On top of that, a parolee's ability to overcome one of these challenges can significantly impact her ability to overcome another. Because of this overlap in barriers, parolees would benefit from "holistic" aid that addresses both individual and gender-specific needs (Richardson & Flower, 2014). Having a plan for her housing, employment, and health once released can be integral to a parolee's chances of success upon release. In turn, it is this likelihood of success that is evaluated by parole boards when making decisions. The following section will address the assessment processes and tools used during the parole process.

Assessment Tools

A growing body of research addresses the use of systematic assessment tools to determine what services would have the most rehabilitative effects on parolees. These tools are used to craft what is commonly called an "intervention plan," where all aspects of parole conditions, restrictions, and interventions are structured and implemented in a way that will limit the risk of re-offending post release (Bosker et al., 2013). Any tools used in making intervention plans should be based on the calculated risks and needs of each parolee (Campbell et al., 2007).

Although there is much support for the effectiveness of risk and needs assessments in the creation of intervention plans, information gained from these assessments are often not actually used when creating and executing a final. For example, research has found that the level of assessed risk and needs of a probationer did not affect the level of contact between the probationer and the probation officer (Bonta et al., 2008). Another study found low levels of consistency between initial assessments and action plans among probation officers (Harris et al., 2004).

The risk-needs-responsivity (R-N-R) risk assessment model is popular within criminal justice settings. The R-N-R model combines the principles of risk, needs, and responsivity that correspond to the types of supervision, intervention, and learning mechanisms that should be used to facilitate a successful reentry (Andrews et al., 1990). Emerging evidence suggests that R-N-R models are successful in creating intervention plans that prevent recidivism, particularly those that seek to increase a parolee's feeling of personal fulfillment, (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). However, more research is needed in order to better understand the effects of this model in the use of parole decisions.

Using evidence-based risk and needs assessment tools in the creation of intervention plans has implications for parole preparation programs. Incarcerated persons provide pertinent information that will inform the relevant decision makers in the parole process. Accordingly, successful packets prepared for parole hearings should include relevant elements that will be considered in the decision-making process.

Racial Disparities

It is important to contextualize the outcomes of parolees within a much larger pattern of racial disparities in the justice system. Minoritized individuals, especially African Americans, are overrepresented at virtually every stage (West, 2009). The racial disparities at the stage of parole is associated with the decision making of parole boards, who are tasked with the responsibility of evaluating the risk of re-offending and/or violating parole. Compared to white offenders, black offenders spend a significantly longer amount of time incarcerated while waiting to be granted parole (Huebner & Bynum, 2008). Additionally, one's criminal history, something that is often more extensive for African Americans,³ is used as a factor in assessing a potential parolee's risk. Protocols for using assessment tools might not be reflected in practice, due to the potential personal biases of parole decision-makers. Scholars have argued that such biases could make it such that one's race alone is used as evidence of that person's assessed risk (Harcourt, 2015; Hamilton, 2015). One must consider the real social contexts that incarcerated individuals of all backgrounds are facing when preparing their parole packets.

³ For a number of reasons including African Americans are more likely to live in urban centers which are more closely monitored by police, thus are more likely to be arrested than those living in suburban or rural settings. There is also growing evidence that there is a complex and compounding relationship between race and the multiple decisions made at various stages of the criminal justice process. An explication of this issue is beyond the scope of this present review.

Current Parole Preparation Programs

There are a few notable parole preparation programs in existence whose primary goal is to increase the number of incarcerated individuals granted release after going before the parole board. One program based in New York “Parole Preparation Project,” serves incarcerated and formerly-incarcerated people. The Parole Preparation Project enables formerly-incarcerated people to guide and mentor those who are still in the process of applying for parole. The Project has helped 160 parole-eligible people, and 60% of those participants were granted parole. Over 95% of those granted parole have remained in the community, with a significant number choosing to volunteer to help others seeking parole (Lewin, 2020). Despite the stated success of this program, it is also important to note that these percentages are only reflective of those who participated in the program, and no control group was used in the evaluation.

In October of 2018, a “Parole Preparation Toolkit”⁴ was released by The Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth. This toolkit serves as a guide to help youth and adult justice-involved individuals navigate the parole process. This toolkit includes information about the steps of the parole process as well as the factors considered by the parole board. The toolkit also provides guidance on developing a reentry plan, demonstrating success, and physically and mentally preparing for a parole hearing. An included appendix covers a range of resources, including templates for letters of recommendation and support; a list of sample questions likely to be asked by the parole board; a list of educational, vocational, and financial resources; as well as reading exercises to increase mindfulness during a stressful parole process. Currently, no evaluations exist to assess this toolkit and its effectiveness. This may be associated with the difficulty of keeping track of who is using the template, which is accessible to anyone online.

The Office of the Appellate Defender for New York Appellate Courts also produced a guide⁵ for parole packet creation. The included template focuses on the appeals processes in the event of a parole denial. The guide includes information about the appeals process, along with a number of templates and recommendations on how to tailor the parole packet to fit the particular conditions of appellate courts.

Although there are a few publicly-available resources that can be used to help guide incarcerated individuals as they navigate through the parole process, there don’t appear to be any structured programs with published systematic evaluations that assess the impact of these programs and/or guidelines. This trend reveals two important needs. First, there is a need for programs that address parole processes. Second, the field needs systematic evaluations that methodically track the implementation, challenges, and outcomes of offenders and ex-offenders.

Ancillary Benefits of Parole Preparation

Parole packet programs have many direct impacts, most of them relating to their ability to plan the housing, employment, and rehabilitation needs as previously discussed. However, such programs can also have collateral benefits that point to the therapeutic processes that can occur while gathering the necessary documents and fulfilling requirements of the parole packets. These

⁴ <https://cfsy.org/wp-content/uploads/CFSY-Parole-Preparation-Toolkit-updated-as-of-10-17-20181.pdf>

⁵ <https://oadnyc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Self-Help-Guide-to-Parole-Preparation-PDF.pdf>

ancillary benefits could hypothetically be equally as important as the more tangible impacts. One might theorize that the ancillary benefits could be evidence of internal and lasting changes that are occurring as individuals are preparing their parole packets. However, more research should be conducted to test the true extent of these impacts.

Goal-Setting

Goal setting is another therapeutic action that takes place during the parole process. Locke & Latham (1990) created goal setting theory to explain the psychological processes that occur in the industrial/organizational workplace. This theory suggests the act of setting challenging, specific goals for the future can influence a person to perform better in the workplace. Research on goal-setting theory suggests setting goals are associated with improvements in athletic performance (Donovan & Williams, 2003), academic performance in higher education (Seijts & Latham, 2001), and managerial performance (Weise & Freund, 2005).

Although there is little research that applies goal-setting theory to carceral or community-correction settings, it is conceivable that the process of setting goals that occur during parole preparation could have an effect on the success of reentering citizens. Goal setting theory has been described as an “open theory” that allows for its application to virtually any setting in which goals are set and measured (Locke & Latham, 2006). One study that looked at the role of self-determined goals in the recidivism outcomes of male and female domestic violence offenders found that setting specific, useful, and positive goals not only reduced rates of recidivism, but they also increased confidence in one’s ability to reach goals (Lee et al., 2007).

Research has also suggested that the creation and consensus of mutual goals between therapists and clients is also a significant factor in goal achievement (Busseri & Tyler, 2004). While parole board members and parole officers are not therapists per se, they can act as sources of accountability much in the same way that therapists hold their patients accountable in reaching goals. In the parole process, goals are not only set in the writing of the personal statements, but the mutual goals are also set in one’s preparation for housing, employment, and any relevant health services. These requirements of parole packets allow for potential parolees to set fundamental goals that may aid in their reintegrative and rehabilitative success. If the constructs of goal-setting theory apply, one could assume that a formerly incarcerated person, who has set clear and ambitious goals for behavior changes, would have a high likelihood for reintegrative success.

Self-Reflection and Journaling

The success of one’s reentry are also partially dependent on the self-reflective processes that occur before release. These reflective processes can require people think about unresolved personal problems, priorities, goals, as well as one’s conceptualization of where they will “fit” in their communities (Herzog et al., 1997). This element of reflection is inherently abstract in nature and was originally formulated for mental healthcare providers to address mental fatigue and improve focus (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). However, the restorative properties of reflection could be applied to individuals in the carceral setting, who may be experiencing a form of mental fatigue due to their incarceration and/or the stressful process of parole.

One practical application of reflection is the action of journaling – a tool that has been proven to have positive effects on substance abuse and recidivism outcomes (Proctor et al., 2012). The effect of journaling is rooted, in part, in the transtheoretical model of change (TMC), which posits that a change in behavior can occur when someone goes through the stages of pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, maintenance, and finally, termination (Prochaska & Velicer, 1997). The other theoretical grounding of interactive journaling is the motivational enhancement theory (MET), wherein people self-assess their situation and identify methods that can create positive change (Miller, 1995). These two theoretical processes, typically used in therapeutic settings, can take place within a series of discussions and exercises, wherein the patient is receiving reciprocal feedback from providers.

The success that parolees experience once released also depends in part on their ability to form a new “self-identity” to make emotional and psychological changes (Cherney & Fitzgerald, 2016). This conceptualization of “pro-social replacement selves” can also have rehabilitative benefits in formerly incarcerated women entering the workforce. One study focusing on female ex-offenders found that the women’s new identities formed in their respective jobs helped them to avoid slipping back into criminal behavior (Opsal, 2012). A reformulation of self-identity could form even while an individual is still incarcerated and preparing for parole, as potential parolees are thinking about their new roles as self-sustaining and contributing members of society.

This change of identity that can occur during incarceration speaks to the process of “prisonization” described by Donald Clemmer (1940), wherein an incarcerated individual goes through a process of assimilation into aspects of prison culture that may not be aligned with conventional values. Potential parolees are also asked to write a remorse statement that allows them to apologize for the harm caused by the crime committed. The process of expressing remorse and creating a “pro-social replacement self” can aid in closing the gap between the standards upheld by prison culture and the more conventional values needed to be successful in the workforce.

Life Story

The process of journaling, which requires reflection and a reconceptualization of self-identity, points to the ways in which parole preparation can bring about positive change in an individual. Most potential parolees are required to write their “life story,” where they must write about their lives prior to incarceration, their experiences during incarceration, and their plans for post-incarceration. Potential parolees are also typically asked to write some form of a personal statement, also called an offender statement, where they are given the space to write about their reflections on their past behaviors, experiences, and accomplishments before and during incarceration. It has been argued that the process of writing can have positive impacts on productivity, performance, and psychological health (Peterson & Mar, 2010). This is effectively an act of journaling, wherein an incarcerated individual confronts and reflects upon elements of their past, while also determining tangible actions that they can take to create a lasting behavioral change.

It is important to note the unique life experiences that can particularly influence women's contact with the correctional system. While there are benefits of writing, setting goals, and self-reflecting/conceptualization, there may also be benefits that one receives when confronting even the painful parts of the past that may have led to criminal behavior. As discussed earlier, many women in correctional settings have experienced past trauma and abuse in childhood and in intimate relationships. These experiences with trauma can sometimes serve as an entry point for a woman's own criminality. For example, some women may turn to criminal behavior in retaliation for abuse, to cope with abuse, to please criminal partners, or to make financial ends meet after leaving an abusive relationship (Moe, 2004). The process of addressing this painful history as it relates to criminal behavior may also have benefits during reentry, when paroled women can foster healthy relationships that can promote desistance from crime.

Limitations

While this literature review serves as an overview of the barriers to reentry and the potential benefits of parole preparation programs for female parolees, there are a number of limitations to the review. One of the most prominent limitations is the noticeable lack of research focusing solely on the outcomes of female parolees when compared to the research that study males. This research deficit led to the inclusion of some studies that were not specific to females when studying the specific barriers and outcomes during reintegration. This deficit also led to the inclusion of a few older studies that, while focusing on female populations, may not reflect current conditions of women involved in the correctional system. Despite these limitations, the current literature review can be used as a reference tool to design the much-needed programs and evaluations that address women's specific barriers and hopefully increase their likelihood of success upon release.

Conclusion

The challenges faced by female parolees in the reintegrative process are as vast as they are sobering. The implementation and evaluation of a parole packet program serves to fill a notable gap in the literature, because it would specifically address the needs and outcomes of female offenders and parolees. For women who are often returning to the disadvantaged situations that they experienced prior to incarceration, their reintegration into society is even more difficult and in need of attention. Parole packets are in themselves a blueprint for how each parolee might break down these barriers to reentry, particularly those barriers related to housing, employment, and healthcare. As these women prepare parole packets, they are also taking actions to ensure barriers are minimized upon release. Additionally, the processes involved in creating the packets, such as reflection, journaling, and goal-setting, also show promise for additional rehabilitative benefits.

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