



# Experiences of Mothering From Prison

A Qualitative Evidence Synthesis

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# Background

- Maternal incarceration disruptive for whole family
- Est. 66% of female prisoners are mothers
- More disruptive than paternal incarceration
- Several studies on impact of children
- Stigmatisation of mothers
- Growing body of literature looking at the experience of women

## Research Question

What are the experiences and perceptions of being a mother in prison while separated from your children?



# Searches

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Database	Syntax
PsychINFO	Exp.mothers AND (expPrisons OR exp. Legal detention OR exp. Incarceration)
Cinahal- EBSCO host	(MH "mothers") AND ((MH "Prisoners") OR (MH "correctional facilities) OR "Incarceration*")
Web of Science- Clarivate	Mother* (author keywords) AND "legal detention" OR "Prison*" OR "Incarceration*" (author keyword)
Scopus	(TITLE-ABS-KEY (Prison* OR Incarcerat* OR "maternal incarceration" OR "correctional facilities" OR "legal detention") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (mother*) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (experience*))
Proquest	Noft (mother*) AND noft(prison* OR Incarcerat* OR "maternal incarceration" OR "correctional facilities" OR "legal detention") AND noft(lived experience)
Ethos	Mother* AND prison* OR jail OR incarcerat* OR legal detention

## Screening

- Stage 1- title and abstract
- Stage 2- Full text (2 individuals)

## Quality Assessment

- CASP
- 1/3 independently marked

## Thematic Synthesis

- Codes
- Descriptive themes
- Analytical themes

## GRADE CERQUAL

- Adequacy, Relevance, Methodological limitations, Coherence

# Process

# Screening

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- Separated from children
- Incarcerated or reflecting back on incarceration
- Qualitative first-hand accounts
- Qualitative data
- Peer-reviewed studies

# Results

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- Searches found 1150 (754 duplicates)
- 90 Screened at stage 2
- 15 studies (16 reports)
- 479 participants
- Age range 18-63
- USA (6), UK (2), Greece, Australia, Portugal, Mexico, South Africa, Israel, Philippines
- 3 post incarceration
- 1 awaiting trial
- Remaining participants were incarcerated



# Methodological limitations

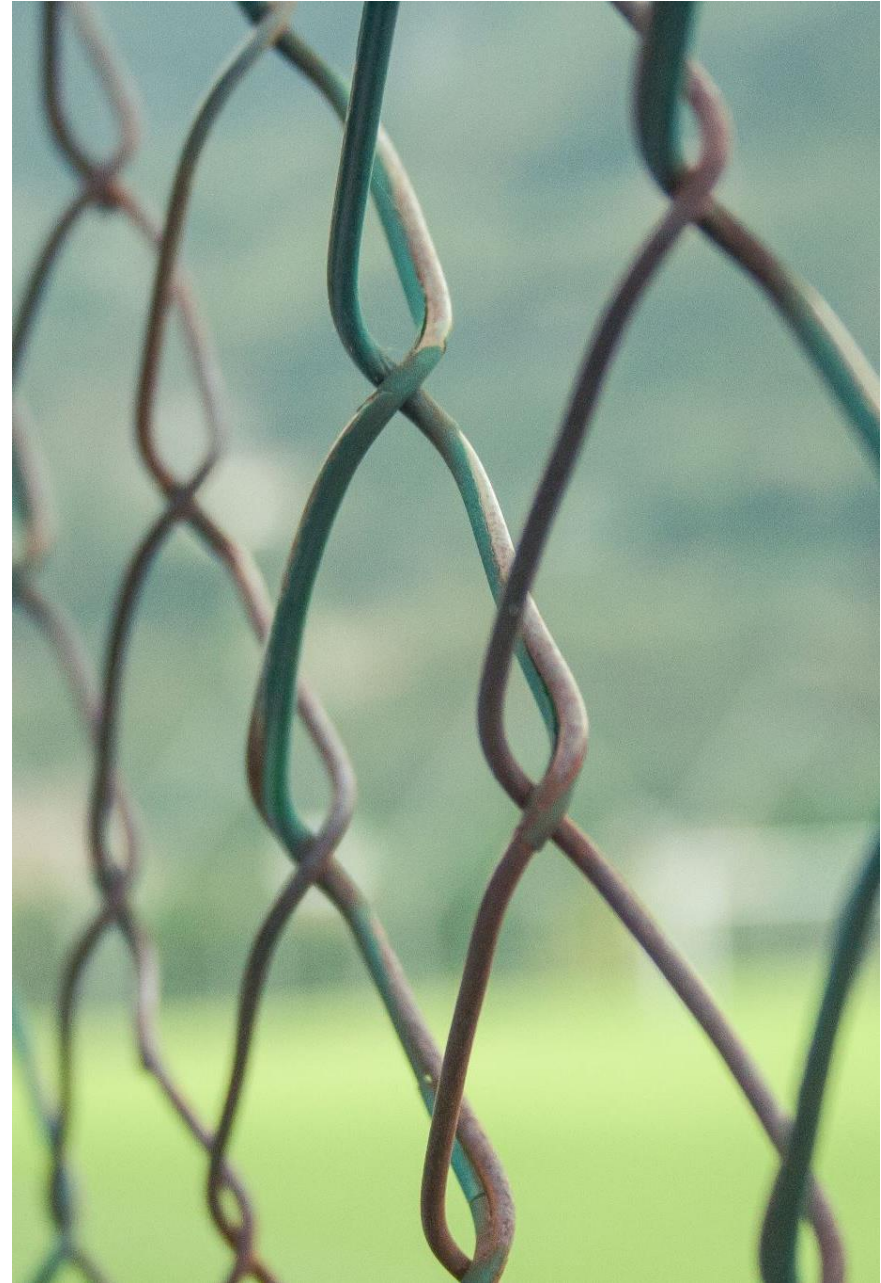
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- Majority didn't give information on relationship between researcher and participant
- A huge amount of information not given- data analysis
- Lack of information on research design





# Themes



# 1. Barriers to Motherhood

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# Lack of Institutional support for mothering

- Facilities and environment
  - Access to T/C
  - Lack of appropriate visiting space
  - Role not valued by staff
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- *'I've got four children, and because of the money that we're on, it's hard not being able to speak to the kids... you're just rushing on the phone just so you can get [time] and squeezing every phone call out of that money you've got on your credit'.*

# Negotiating with External Caregiver

*‘My niece is very strict with my daughter; I understand she has to be like that sometimes, but not excessively like one time when she hit my daughter. And I had an argument with her “I won’t allow you or anyone else to hit my daughter”*

- Precarious position
- Ambivalent feelings
- Frustrated
- Denied contact

# Intergenerational cycle

*'Now it's a vicious cycle, my child is living in the same house dealing with the same issues because I'm here and can't take care of him'*

- Lack of agency
- Poverty, violence and Crime

# Pain of Separation

*'I was locked in this horrible lonely, scary place with leaking breasts and no baby ... I held my pillow like it was my child, and it was soaked with my milk and my tears ... I felt bereft, I have never felt grief or pain like it'*

- Distress and pain caused by being separated
- Particular pain of being separated from babies
- Struggle of knowing their children were hurting and not being able to comfort them

## 2. The Burden of Perceived Maternal Failure



# Guilt and Shame

- 'bad mother'
- Pain caused to the children
- Threatens maternal identity
- Failure to live up to societies image of good mother
- Shame of what they had inflicted on children

*The girl failed school this year. (...) She has nothing. Her father has already been in prison. Now I am, and my sister. I won't punish her because in the end, it's my fault'*



# Awareness of the Impact on Children

*'And then I called her, she looked at me, and it seemed like she was seeing the devil. She screamed, yelled . . . clung to the neck of my mother, saying she didn't want [to be here]. She has forgotten me'*

- Awareness of the negative impact on children
- Powerless to change the negative impact
- Uprooting of children
- Some children separated from siblings

# 3. Salvation Through Motherhood

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# Preserving Maternal Identity

- Moral identity of being a mother
- Absolved their offending
- 'Othering'
- Irreplaceability of motherhood

*'She justified why her marijuana use was different than other women's use of harder drugs: I can't be like, 'oh, we're the same type of woman' because we're not. If it came down to me smoking or selling my ass, I would not. I just wouldn't smoke. That's not an option. You're degrading yourself as a woman, a mother, as anything'*

# Children as motivation

- *'I have three wonderful children. I hold myself close to them, I speak with them every day, and they are the ones who give me strength, affection and support. Some days I'm saddest, and I call them, and they notice I'm upset and they give me strength and courage'*
- Motivation to cope
- Strength given by children
- Motivation to tackle addiction
- Motivation to commit crimes

# Protecting the Child

*'The hallway, that long hallway, and then they were walking down, and they were crying. I was like, Christ, I'll never put them through that again. And I didn't'*

- Sacrificing their needs to protect the child
- Forgoing visits
- Saving money for T/C
- Decision to tell them the truth or not

# 4. A Better Future



# Benefits of Incarceration for the women

- Time and tools to become better mothers
- Safe Refuge

*'Being in here, I know now I can be happy and survive without a significant other. That's the best thing prison did for me. Now I see myself as capable. Capable for caring for my daughters – not the best, but capable. After 25 years of unhealthy relationships, I think I am choosing them [my kids]'*

# Hopes for the Future

*'I don't want to do drugs, I don't want to sell them... I just want to be a better parent to my kids'*

- Setting an example
- Changing as people and as mothers
- Breaking the cycle
- Changing lifestyle



# Implications

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- More detail in qualitative studies
- Greater support for mothering roles
  - Important for re-entry and reunification
- Overnight visits
- Therapeutic support for mothers
  - Conflictual feelings of motherhood
- Training of staff