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ARTICLES

Formerly Incarcerated Women Speak Out

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ABSTRACT
This article presents the stories of formerly incarcerated women as they transition from prison back to their communities. The purpose of the article, based on feminist and visual ethnographic research methods, is to learn from the women themselves about the entities that support their efforts to rebuild their lives and stay out of prison as well as the barriers that impede such efforts. A major focus of this article is the women who mobilized on behalf the civil and human rights for all formerly incarcerated people and thus become their own advocates for change in policies and societal attitudes toward those with criminal records.

KEYWORDS
Formerly incarcerated women; activism; recovery

Reality Check, by Maribel B.

As I lay at night in my two women cell,
I realize how I put la familia through hell,
never caring who I hurt.
Now I understand what my sister meant when she called me a jerk.
The criminal life was all I've even known,
although it's not something that was taught in my home.
The nerve of me to say that nobody understands,
forgetting how over and over they have given me a chance.
I'm hard to love because I've been on drugs,
Living mi vida like a true life thug,
Putting la familia through so much pain.
They are so tired of my stupid games.
I have three children I never raised,
because of my ignorant and selfish ways.
My eldest son he went astray, and got caught up in a barrio's gang.
Would he have lived had I changed my ways?
I'll never know, but I know one thing, it's not too late.
I still had faith in two more children who sit home and wait.
But right now I'm owned by the state,
Chowchilla state prison is my home today.
Besides Jesus Christ there is one more person I want to thank,
my sister Maricela for putting me in this place
because like an idiot I used her name to not face up to my mistakes.

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All spun out, not giving a fuck,
on the streets, running amuck.
All these things go through my head,
thanking the lord I'm not dead.
Serving my time for all my crimes,
But the best part of all is that I give up my life to this man, Jesus Christ.
On September 2003 he opened my heart and my eyes.
This person I speak of I do not want to be.
So I drop to my knees every night, telling my father that I give up the fight,
thanking him and my sis because this is not how I want to live my life.

Introduction

Ten years ago I began a study of formerly incarcerated women after their release from prison. I was concerned about that space in time when women return to (reenter) the outside world, that time frame, that gray area in which they could either find their way to economic and emotional security, disappear into the streets, or go back to prison. Simply, I wanted to conduct research on women attempting to rebuild their lives upon release from prison. My burning questions were What happens to women upon reentry? What entities facilitate the rebuilding of their lives, and what are the barriers to their reentry? In that time, I conducted six years of research, made a documentary, and wrote several articles.

The purpose of this particular article is to put forth stories collected from the women regarding their post-prison experiences, as well as stories from those among them who are advocates for change in policies and societal attitudes toward formerly incarcerated women. The poem at the beginning of this article, "Reality Check," is by Maribel, who is featured prominently in my documentary and in this article. This, one of her many poems, conveys in a nutshell, her tumultuous life. I write this article because I hold dear Maribel and all the other women who shared their stories with me and because I honor the front-line work that social workers provide and hope that these stories will move social service providers to join with the activists to create change on behalf of the formerly incarcerated.

Included in this article are the methods by which I gathered the women's stories, followed by a brief literature review, then the women's heartfelt narratives of their journey upon release from prison. They share their hopes and aspirations along with their frustrations and setbacks, all of which have led a number of the women to become activists, struggling to gain basic rights, such as custody of their children and access to employment opportunities. Although the women in this study are from the Los Angeles/Long Beach/San Bernardino regions of Southern California, their struggles and quests are similar to those of formerly incarcerated women across the

country (Bloom, Owen, & Covington, 2003; O'Brien, 2001; Richie, 2001; van Olphen, Eliason, Freudenberg, & Barnes, 2009).

I began this study of formerly incarcerated women when my interest was piqued by a program for "ex-offenders" at South Los Angeles' community-based organization, Community Coalition for Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment, where I was a member of the board of directors. At one of the program meetings, I met two executive directors and founders of recovery homes for women, Ms. Susan Burton from A New Way of Life Reentry Project in Watts (South Los Angeles) and Ms. Kim Carter from Time for Change Foundation in the city of San Bernardino (located one hour east of Los Angeles). They graciously opened the doors to their homes where I met many of the women I write about in this article. I also became acquainted with Dr. Marilyn Montenegro (PhD, LCSW), another dedicated service provider who, for close to 40 years, has provided social work services for incarcerated women as well as for those released from prison. Marilyn, in turn, introduced me to the residents at Harbour Area Halfway Houses in Long Beach, along with its executive director, Monica Stel. Kim, Susan, and Monica are themselves in recovery and have been so for many years. Although they continue inspiring other women, they caution us to be cognizant of the difficult journey entailed in recovery, which is fraught with numerous complications and often insurmountable obstacles.

Along with the contacts I made owing to the women mentioned above, I approached Father Greg Boyle from Homeboy Industries (considered the largest gang intervention and at-risk youth employment program in the country), with whom I had worked between 1990 and 1996 while he was Pastor at Dolores Mission Church in the Boyle Heights area of Los Angeles, and I was a member of the board of directors of Proyecto Pastoral, the Church's nonprofit affiliate. I am grateful to Father Greg who, along with Shirley Torres (Director of Curriculum at that time), introduced me to several of the young women working at Homeboy.

Of grave concern to these individuals and organizations was the acceleration in the number of women imprisoned, primarily for drug-related, nonviolent activities. Statistics show that from the 1980s to the 2000s, a dramatic rise in the numbers of incarcerated women in U.S. state and federal penitentiaries, primarily among poor and working-class women of color. Just between 1980 and 2005 alone, those figures increased more than eightfold, from 12,000 to over 106,000, with women of color disproportionately represented. Nearly four times as many African American women and one and two-thirds times as many Latinas were incarcerated in comparison to Anglo/European American women (Deschenes, Owen, & Crow, 2006; Harrison & Beck, 2006). However, since my research, there have been incremental but encouraging changes at all levels of government, from federal to state to county, largely the result of the mobilization among the formerly incarcerated and their supporters. For example, in California, nonviolent drug convictions are now more likely to be considered misdemeanors in lieu

of felonies (Proposition 47, on the November 2014 ballot), and individuals with such convictions are sent to jail instead of prison (AB 109, 2011).

Methodology

During the first year of my research I visited the four locations (Harbour Area Halfway Houses, Homeboy Industries, A New Way of Life Reentry Project, and Time for Change Foundation), interacting with the residents at meetings, social events, classes and the like. These encounters eventually led to a number of lengthy interviews. I began filming the following year, recording the women in their daily lives, at their homes, and on their outings with their children, as they searched for employment and attended meetings. I also documented and filmed the women in their activist mode at public hearings, conferences, demonstrations, and meetings with elected officials. Between 2006 and 2010, my crew and I filmed approximately 55 hours of digital footage and transcribed every film taping. It is from these raw data that I selected the material for this and other articles, as well as for my documentary, When Will the Punishment End? (López-Garza, 2010, 2015; Velázquez Vargas, Pardo, & López-Garza, in press). Appendix A contains the list of all interviews referred to in this text. In addition, I have included in Appendix B the names and contact information of all the central entities that graciously participated in this research study on formerly incarcerated women.

All the interviews referred to in this article, as well as the passages below each subheading, were obtained from this extensive body of raw data. Three sets of people are identified in this article: formerly incarcerated women, service providers, and the women who run the recovery homes. I use the full names of the people in the latter two categories but only the first names of the formerly incarcerated women.

For the documentary, we created a script, a story line, to follow when editing, and we spent an additional year editing and revising the script. I thank the individuals who helped create this documentary: Maritza Alvarez, Miguel Duran, Luis Colina, and particularly my coproducer/director, Brandon Lopez, from whom I learned so very much.

Literature review

Excellent research has been conducted on the causes and consequences of mass incarceration of poor people and people of color. Included is the decisive book The New Jim Crow by civil rights advocate, litigator and law professor Michelle Alexander (2012), who lays out the details of the U.S. system's maintenance of a "permanent second class citizenship" through massive incarceration. Bruce Western and Christopher Muller (2013) conducted a survey of the micro- and macro-level studies that focus on the social consequences of mass incarceration,

then presented the challenges of measuring the aggregate effects of said incarceration on poverty, employment, family structure, and crime. Employing quantitative data on, for example, rates of arrests and imprisonment by race and gender, Robynn Cox (2016) showed how policies that reflect institutional racism have led to undue unequal treatment and detention of African Americans in our prisons. Inside This Place, Not of It is a deeply moving compilation of stories by 13 incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women (Levi & Waldman, 2011). Ruthie Wilson Gilmore's Golden Gulag offers the often overlooked political, economic, and geographic dimensions of mass incarceration (2007). Physician Gabor Mate (2008) has written convincingly and movingly about addictions, incorporating the fields of medicine, developmental neurobiology, social sciences, and history. Martha Escobar raised the serious problem of incarcerated immigrants, a people often overlooked and with fewer legal rights than U.S. citizens (2011). Reports by governmental offices, foundations, and institutes have additionally contributed to our understanding of the purposes and consequences of the incarcerating of low-income people and people of color (e.g., Children's Defense Fund, 2007; Rebecca Project for Human Rights & National Women's Law Center, 2007).

The research topic upon which I concentrated my study during the past 10 years focuses on the challenges women, in particular, face in their transition from prison back into their communities. Among the most prolific, if not a leading, experts on women leaving prison is Patricia O'Brien. In her extensive work, conducted largely in the Midwest, of formerly incarcerated women—at times in concert with colleagues—O'Brien notes the limited research on this subject. My research parallels O'Brien's in that we both address questions related to women leaving prison, rebuilding their lives, reconnecting to family members and children, and "how...parole or supervision processes affect women's ability to renegotiate their reentry after incarceration" (O'Brien, 2001, p. xi). We both reflect upon and listen to the women regarding what they need to rebuild their lives.

Applying a feminist methodological approach, she relies, as I do, largely on the voices of the women themselves as the main source of her data collecting. In her work, O'Brien presents her concept, "empowerment framework," which refers to the external socioeconomic resources surrounding the women, along with the internal resources of the women themselves, which they marshal together to rebuild their lives (O'Brien, 2001, Ch. 5). Other important contributors to the field are Keta Miranda (2003) and Juanita Díaz-Cotto (2006), who specifically studied Chicana/Latina experiences with the criminal justice system, and the amazing Kim Carter (coauthors Disep Ojukwau and Lance Miller) who, along with her recovery projects and her community-based activism, conducted extensive research among women in prison as well as those released from prison, on topics such as education, employment, finances, and access to health services (2006).

Results from this study

Release from prison: What happens on the way "home"?

> Being released from prison holds a lot of anxiety.... You have just been given back all your choices, in a split second from having no choices to having a lot of choices.
>
> Susan Burton (interview, 2007)

As Susan Burton (interview, 2007) asserts, women leave prison with a sense of anticipation of the possibilities before them but often without the necessary tools and preparation, aside from the $200 "gate money" to transition back to society. Moreover, many leave with less than the $200, having to pay for the state-issued clothing they wear when they leave. If women are not met at the prison gate by family members or friends, there is also the cost of transportation, most likely bus rides to the station nearest their destinations.

The women may encounter a web of violence and abuse upon their release. A common scenario among the women whom I encountered is arriving at the Los Angeles downtown bus depot adjacent to skid row, an area surrounded by predators, pimps, and drugs. Often abandoned by family, many of the women have few safe refuges available to them and, because they more than likely leave prison without identification such as a California driver's license or social security card, for reasons discussed below, the women's access to shelter, such as a hotel or motel, are limited. Whatever is left of the $200 gate money goes quickly, and the women soon realize that although they need to acquire funds to survive, there are few legal means to do so quickly. Hence, running out of finances, becoming homeless, and getting into trouble with the law if they do not leave these danger zones immediately are real possibilities (M. Montenegro, interview on film, June 6, 2005). Stormie, one of the women in our study, speaks to this experience (interview on film, October 19, 2007):

> Prison was going to kick me out into the streets. I had $200 in my pocket. I had nowhere to go. I was going to get to Long Beach about eleven at night. Not even a shelter was going to take me. I didn't have an ID. What was I going to do? ...I went to my (prison) chaplain. I was crying. I knew what was going to happen. I was going to get loaded. I was going to violate my probation. I was going to go back into prison, and I was afraid that I was going to commit a bigger crime.

While there is an inkling of signs that some women possess their IDs when released, generally speaking, women leave prison without any form of identification. The apparent reason for this is a standard practice for jail personnel to destroy personal documents if no one retrieves these documents after a prescribed period of time after a woman is transferred from jail to prison. Therefore, when a woman is released from prison, one of her foremost tasks

is to obtain some form of identification (e.g., Social Security card, driver's license). However, if a woman does not find a place to stay upon her release from prison and becomes homeless, she cannot get her ID because she does not have an address. This set of developments is one of the first obstacles to women's successful reentry. What is more, in their attempts to obtain identification, some of the women are required to prove their citizenship.

The need to find safe shelter "right away"

> Some of the women we talked to who have successfully completed parole said that the single most important factor was that they had housing, and that could be a friend or relative who took them in when they came out of prison. It could be a program that they went to, but the factor was having a place to go to live immediately upon leaving prison.
>
> Marilyn Montenegro (interview, 2006)

Because of the perils a woman encounters upon her release from prison, it is crucial that she find safe shelter immediately, as mentioned in the passage above by Dr. Montenegro. Moreover, if she has drug convictions, she is banned from a number of welfare services. Women's own eligibility for Cal Works is limited, although less so than previously,[1] and she is often not eligible for HUD-supported housing. Furthermore, anyone, family members or otherwise, living in public housing risks eviction if they allow someone with a felony conviction into their homes. In addition, formerly incarcerated people generally cannot receive federal subsidies such as college loans if they apply for the loans within two years of their release. However, due to recent policy changes, some of these bans are not as stringent as they previously were five to ten years ago. For example, recently, Susan Burton's A New Way of Life Reentry Project launched a pilot program for people returning from prison who want to live with family members who have been living in HUD housing. Ms. Burton's pilot program, in conjunction with the City of Los Angeles Housing Authority and the Sheriff's Department, is going well and has received some national attention.

Nonetheless, recovery homes remain the critically needed transitional shelters and supportive services for women who are in peril of the danger zones as well as ineligible for various forms of social services (Allard, 2002; Carter et al., 2006). The entities (the three recovery homes and the Homeboy work center) with whom I worked in this study provide helpful services, such

[1]Cal Works is a welfare program that gives cash aid and services to eligible needy California families. During the time I conducted my research, while her children may have been eligible, a woman with drug convictions was not eligible. The law has since changed, and now a woman with drug convictions can receive Cal Works for 48 months. If single or without her children, she can get General Relief (GR), which is approximately $221 a month. But if the person caring for her children is receiving Cal Works for them, she, the mother, is not eligible for Cal Works and cannot receive GR.

as counseling, life-skills training, job placement, and medical referrals, along with the often essential moral support not often found at other shelters and support services.

In an earlier passage, Stormie shares her anxiety about leaving prison. In the following, she expresses her gratitude to Monica Stel at Harbour Area Halfway Houses (interview on film, October 19, 2007):

> What a magical miracle that my (prison) chaplain got ahold of Monica, and Monica made room for me and I had a place to go on Christmas day. I did not have to go back into the streets. I did not have to have that same meaningless life all over again.

In tears, Theresa, from A New Way of Life Reentry Project, recounts (interview on film, January 2006):

> June 2004 in prison for the first time and I met Susan [Burton]. It was an experience for me that I would not forget. I disqualified for educational service in prison because I did not have enough time. So when I get out I cannot get a job. When I met Susan, I said this would be a chance for me to get my children. She picked me up from prison and took me to live at A New Way of Life.

Eyes overflowing, Tonya speaks of the importance of a safe shelter where women find assistance to rebuild their lives (interview on film, November 11, 2007):

> This program [Harbour Area Halfway House] allowed me to get a job. This place here will give you what you need. There are not places like [this] around.... People think that once you get clean that all will be well. But what happens is that all the wreckages of your past come right front and center, paying bills and debt, et cetera.

Precisely because many women cannot find safe shelter upon their release from prison, they turn to those who draw them back into the life that led them into trouble. Unfortunately, the system and government officials (e.g., parole officers) who have jurisdiction over those on parole do not assist the women in their search for housing. Michelle, resident of Time for Change Foundation, shared with us what she encountered upon release from prison (interview on film, March 17, 2008):

> When I came out there were all these obstacles.... My first obstacle was my parole officer.... He said he wanted to see me in two days, but I did not have anywhere to stay. So basically I was homeless. That was not his concern. He goes "find somewhere and get in touch with me, I want to see you in two days," without even making a phone call to find me an adequate place to stay.
>
> While I was in prison we had a reentry program in which Kim (Carter) came to speak, and I got her card.... I had done a few calls prior to calling her... Right upfront they wanted to know if I had any income and stuff like that, and it was getting frustrating.... I called (Kim).... She asked me where I was and I told her I was right down here in the midst of...what we call now "drug haven."... So this is where my parole officer sent me into. So when I called her (Kim) and told her this is where I

> was, she told me, "You go right back inside that Jack-in-a-Box and you stay right there. Someone will be there to get you in five minutes." So I did that, and within five minutes someone had come to pick me up, and I've been with Time for Change, at the facility, for about two years now, and today I'm getting my first apartment.

Monica Stel relates the story of a woman who was not as fortunate, who instead got caught up in the cycle: "...the only person she knew that she could call was the pimp. He paid for the cab for her to get from jail to Long Beach and she spent three days doing "services" to pay for the cab. By the time she was done with that she was so loaded she couldn't get out of the addiction, and she was off...in prison now doing another term" (interview on film, June 29, 2007)

In summary, attaining a safe place to transition from prison to the outside world, a place to receive support, services, and encouragement is of utmost importance. This is exemplified by Stormie's story of despair replaced by a sense of renewed faith in living (interview on film, November 12, 2007):

> Just before I went to prison I was on the street with a needle in my arm yelling at the sky. "Please god let me die," I prayed. Today I wake up and I am so happy so excited about living. I have a simple little life. It's a great life."

Evidence suggests, therefore, that if women do not find this transitional space immediately upon their release, and if they do not receive the services they need, then for many of them the cycle of homelessness, addiction, and incarceration is virtually inevitable. On the other hand, a safe shelter upon release, which offers services, goes a long way to help women begin their journey to rebuilding their lives.

Recovery

> They say, "You do not have to believe"...(just) believe that they believe in us, the girls in the program. I used to believe because they believe. Now I believe.
>
> Maribel (interview, 2008)

The road to recovery is a difficult one for many of the women. It is fraught with coming to terms with past traumas, dim prospects for the future and, as the women state below, living with the dailiness of life. In the following passages, Maribel, Patricia, and Stormie share about the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) Steps to recovery, the mindset and spiritual strength necessary to stay clean, along with the factors that lead to relapse and the power of recovery. We begin with Maribel, who discusses the importance of the AA Steps in her recovery (interview on film, January 3, 2008):

> See, this is the work (points to the Alcoholics Anonymous book and workbook on her lap). It's about the steps and talks about the disease. There are so many times that I wanted to get clean. There were moments of clarity.... But you do not know

the facts about how to stay clean. So you end up getting loaded again. So the program breaks it down for you. Once you get clean, you realize that it was not the drugs. That was just the symptom.

Once you get these facts you have a better chance of staying clean because you have a better understanding of why you used, what you were running from. Whether it was about what happened when you were a kid or not being able to deal with what is happening now.

Maribel reads from the book:

The questions are like: "Are you completely convinced you cannot have a drink or drugs, cause if you are not convinced, then you are not ready." That happened to me, in 1993, I thought I could drink because I thought my addiction was to crack, not drinking. I thought the problem was my addiction to crack, I did not know it was me, my compulsion. It sets off the craving. It is not just mental, it is spiritual and physical.... So I started drinking and within a week I was back to the drugs. It is not really the drugs, it's what happens to me when I take mind-altering substances. I go back...my defenses are down, and that frame of mind "I need something more" kicks in.

For Maribel and many of the other women, faith plays an important role in recovery and reclaiming their lives. Through the disappointment, disillusionment, and mistreatment they face, it is frequently their spiritual or religious faith that remains the driving force sustaining their sobriety:

I do not know what God looks like, but that don't matter to me. But my god is powerful, more powerful than drugs. And loving, compassionate. Because I do not always trust people in the (Narcotics Anonymous) program, but I trust God. "Okay, God, only you and my willingness to stay clean is way stronger."...So you have to do the work, you have to have a sponsor, but the bottom line is that you have had to make that conscious decision.

Patricia, a resident of A New Way of Life, reflects on her strong faith and philosophy of recovery (interview on film, January 3, 2008):

...God took over and said don't worry, Patricia, it will work out. I don't know what happened or how it happened. The best thing I could say is truly live life for today. If you are an addict or an alcoholic like me, that is all you can focus on. Tomorrow is going to come and you will deal with it in the way you will. I am not trying to change the world. We change, and when we change, circumstances change.

As a long-term member of A New Way of Life, along with her faith, Patricia is also imbued with a strong sense of sisterhood and desire to help others. She continues:

I wish I had a louder voice to let women know that it is okay. It takes practice to develop skills of being responsible, follow-through skills. I want them to know that we do have follow-through skills, that it is possible to change in our lives, a little bit at a time. There is so much I wish women knew, that there is a life out there waiting for them that does not include drugs and alcohol.

Filming in Maribel's bathroom, the camerawoman (Maritza Alvarez), Maribel and I are crammed into the tiny space with Maribel reflecting on her life as she applies her makeup (interview on film, January 3, 2008):

> When I think of using, I want to smoke a joint or drink wine, I think about what happens. I don't just take a drink. I leave my family and go out into the streets. I play it all out. And I think of my son. I think about how it would hurt my kids, I think of what Ricardo said before he died, "Get your shit together." So I don't know what tomorrow holds.... This disease is so powerful that it never leaves you.

In response to the question "What gets you through those times?" Maribel answers, "I think I allow myself to go through it. I do not beat myself. Now I feel stuff in the raw."

Sharing the story of her traumatic life, Stormie also discussed her new life, which has given her meaning (interview on film, November 12, 2007):

> I was at the bottom, and look at me now. In the morning, the girls (at Harbour Area Halfway Houses) and I get together and we talk about our higher power, our spiritual paths...how we are trying to move forward, our gratitude list, unconditional love. I receive it now. I had only read about this in books.
>
> Every day I feel alive... Before I could not breathe in my own skin. When I would hear about child abuse or when my mother would come into town, I would get high. When I feel those things (now), I double up my meetings, I go to my sponsor and speak with my therapist. The meetings are the alternative to using drugs.

Although the road to recovery is a difficult one, recent policy changes may help to ease that journey. For example, two recent California policy changes have modified the way people with drug convictions are dealt with by the state. With the 2011 Realignment, anyone with a nonviolent conviction is sent to jail, not prison. Then with passage of Proposition 47 in 2014, drug possessions are considered misdemeanors, not felonies. This hypothetically means that people with mere drug-possession convictions are not sent to prison unless that conviction is accompanied by other activities, such as possession for sale or manufacturing or trafficking, in which case they would be sentenced to prison (M. Montenegro, personal communication, September 7, 2015). But there is much more work to be done to lessen the punitive approach for people with addiction and to increase the more healing and humane methods, such as the counseling and meetings mentioned by Stormie. These social service approaches are found, in study after study, to better address the pain people carry within and the distress dealt to them by society.

Family reunification: Finding the way back to children and family

> Work furlough model is for men.... For women, their primary importance is family reunification
>
> Monica Stel (interview, June 2007)

As Monica states (June 29, 2007), the main intention upon reentry, for the majority of women I met, is to find their way back to their families, particularly their children. However, women face a number of challenges in their attempts to repair their relationships with their children and other family members.

Aside from the psychological and emotional consequences of their separation from their children, women are often faced with their families' concrete economic needs. Do they have the wherewithal to support themselves and their children? Can they find employment? Are they eligible for schooling and training? What entity will financially assist them? Are they eligible for SSI; that is, are there mental or physical reasons they cannot find employment? Can they receive public assistance? So even though their children may be eligible, the women themselves are often not eligible for many social services.

A large number of the children of women sent to prison are cared for by family members, but 10% of children who lose their parents through incarceration become themselves wards of the state, housed in foster homes and agencies (Carter, Ojukwu, & Miller, 2006; Little Hoover Institute, 2004). Nationwide, more than 463,000 children live in foster care. In California, which has the largest foster-care population of any state, the number of foster children has tripled in a 20-year span (The Children's Bureau, 2009). Obtaining custody of one's children becomes exponentially more complicated when the children are in the foster system. A woman must show that she is able to care for her children and has a safe place for them to live, which is difficult to accomplish, given the limited access she has to services and resources.

The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 was passed by Congress with the understanding that children were languishing in foster care. While this act, which some coin as "fast-track adoption," appears to have been created out of a humanitarian concern for the children, it has led to a different set of problems. Under the act, when parental rights are terminated, the county must act as the parent until an adoption is completed. Generally, the courts do not terminate parental rights until an adoptive party has been identified. However, once the potential adoptive parent has been identified, the courts move quickly to terminate parental rights for a myriad of reasons, including if the mother is not able to reunify with her children because she is in prison for more than a year. If the child is an infant or toddler, the time may be even shorter (Lapidus et al., 2005; M. Montenegro, personal communication, August 12, 2011).

Consequently, if her children have been placed in foster care, a mother released from prison needs to move quickly to regain custody of her children before her time runs out and her children are eligible for adoption. Patricia speaks of her attempt to regain custody of her children (interview on film, January 3, 2008).

> Right now I have twin boys. They are 13 and in foster care. I am trying to get them back as we speak.... They have been in foster care for three years. I got little Richard back because right now it is a fresh case.... So I am going to children's court to get a...Change of the Court Order. You are asking the judge to change the order, and put the reasons down as to why the judge should change his mind. And my reasons are substantial. I have successfully gotten my child back. I have been sober for two years. I have a foundation, a job and a checking account. I have transportation and medical and health care for my children, if needed. Since I have had Richard back I made sure he got his medical and dental care.... So I did all that. So they will be closing the case with Richard next month.

Patricia offers advice for other women in the same situation:

> I like helping women. I want to...let them know that it is possible to beat the system, to win your children back and not give up. I am 46 and will be 47 next month. I didn't know any better. I did not have someone tell me that it is simple as following the rule. And the rule is right now, to have your children hostage in their care. All you have to do is reach down inside of yourself and say, "I can do this." Go to those parenting classes, anger-management classes, whatever it is you have to do, do it. But a lot of women do not believe that. They believe they have lost their children and they cannot do anything about it.

In search of employment and structural barriers to employment

> ...if a person cannot find a job, cannot find housing, then there is nothing tangible to connect her back to the community.
>
> Kim Carter (interview, 2008)

Finding a job is difficult for the vast majority of formerly incarcerated. There exist numerous impediments to employment. For certain, a criminal record is a barrier to women's attempts to find gainful employment. Conservative statistics indicate that only four of ten formerly incarcerated women find employment in the "regular labor market" within the first year of release (Women's Prison Association, 2011), and other statistics point out that 70% to 75% of parolees face unemployment (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, 2010; Carter et al., 2006), raising the question: Without work, how will the formerly incarcerated support their families, pay rent, pay their bills, and reintegrate into their communities and society at large?

Often the barriers to rebuilding come from the system itself. There exist strict limits on the types of jobs available to those who possess substance-abuse convictions. They cannot qualify for work (e.g., hairdresser) that has anything to do with "at-risk populations," which includes children, the elderly, the disabled. In Tonya's case (interview on film, November 11, 2007):

> My parole officer said I could not work there (hotel) because he said I could not work around money and credit cards, but I never had credit card charges.... I took

the job anyway and went to my parole officer's supervisor, who told him to let me take the job.

There are numerous other barriers to employment, including lack of education and training. However, most experts in the field agree that employers' systematic exclusion of anyone with a felony record is the major barrier to their access to gainful employment (Employers Group Research Services, 2002; Legal Action Center, 2004). Kim Carter found in her study that if there was just one thing that formerly incarcerated people would change so they can rebuild their lives, that one thing would be to not have to check the box on employment applications that asks "Have you ever been convicted of a felony?" If they did not have to check that box, the respondents in her research study strongly believe that they would have a fair and reasonable chances of securing employment and becoming productive members of society (Carter, interview on film, March 17, 2008; Carter et al., 2006). Rhonda shares her experience (interview on film, January 18, 2008):

When I was 17, I had two confrontations with a lady, and she threatened me. I ended up shooting at the lady, and I was charged with aggravated assault without intent. They charged me without a prior, but it was a felony. I got probation and I completed probation and never got into trouble again.... So I went on with my life with that strike against me, but I educated myself to balance that. Even after getting an education I felt terrorized when I wanted to apply for a job that I gotten enough education to qualify for.... Like, I wanted to apply for the County of Orange. I went to school and got everything I needed for this job. But I got scared. "What do I say about that question?" That always haunted me. "What do I say, what do I do about having this felony?"... That was 20 years ago, and I still have to deal with that question. That fear in my heart that I will be rejected. I'm even on the verge of having my second degree. I think, "Is it going to be enough? Am I going to be able to get to the level in my career with this felony?"

But I keep pushing on, with the hope and the faith, but I still have that fear in the back of my mind. Is all of this in vain? Do I struggle and toil with school and still be held back? I do have a job now.... I do not make the type of money and I'm not in the job I should be in, compared to my work ethic and what I am willing to offer...the education I have. I am not getting paid enough. If I did not have a felony I would be looked at more in the jobs that I apply for. Recently, the job I was so afraid to apply for, I went for. I passed the test with flying colors, and I went through the interview, but I did not get the job.

In my conversations with the women in my study, I heard countless stories of thwarted attempts to find employment. Maribel's response to the question of what has been the most challenging barrier to rebuilding her life, was the following (interview on film, January 3, 2008):

...It was my job history. The majority of my crimes were felonies.... Twenty-something years as an addict, I had a lot of doors shut to me. I would have letters

sent to me with my rap sheet saying, "This is why we cannot hire you."...I could not find a job for a long time because of my felonies.... I stopped going to (Narcotics Anonymous) meetings for six months because I was humiliated and became very resentful.

"How many jobs did you apply for? How long were you looking?"

Oh my god, odd jobs, restaurants, anywhere I could, Lowe's, Home Depot, places that said they would hire. But they were not hiring me.... But after I prayed, I started school two days later and that day I was offered two jobs. One at the coffee shop at the school. I was honest with them. I was in recovery but I needed a job. They called me and said okay. I also applied for this inventory company. I lied that I did not have any felonies and they did not check.... So there are some places that will give you a chance but the majority.... After you try to change your life they make it so hard. I believe they just want you to go back to prison. Once you sign that little box, forget it, you will not get the job.

"How do you know that?"

Because I have experienced it. I had to lie at one job, but the other I got the job because the lady who I was honest to told me to not check the box. I was pleading with her for the job.

At Time for Change Foundation, Michelle (interview on film, March 17, 2008) shares her experience of looking for employment:

When I got out of prison I had gone to different jobs, put in different applications. In total I think I must of did about 45 applications within a two-month period, and it got frustrating.... I did not get any calls back. So I believe on my 46th application I just went ahead and lied. So in that instance I did revert to my old behavior, which was lying to get to what I needed. And this particular company called me back...and so by this time I was enrolled into a 12-step process where we were encouraged to be honest in our daily lives. So when she called me back for the second interview on Monday, I had to go and tell her the truth; that I, in fact, lied on the application. And her response to me was, "What was your crime?" and when I explained the crime to her, she explained that "It really has nothing to do with the job you are applying for." But had I not checked No, she wouldn't have even looked at my application and she so much told me that....

With the stories the women shared, it became increasingly evident that formerly incarcerated women have a difficult time securing employment. Many suspect that checking the box on the application form plays a major role in employers' decisions to not hire formerly incarcerated people. However, if people are not allowed to reintegrate back into society as people who want and need jobs and the wherewithal to support their families, then what are their options? This is an important question to raise in light of the high recidivism rates throughout the United States among the formerly incarcerated.

One place, one lone oasis in a sea of rejections, that accepts formerly incarcerated people with opens arms, is Homeboy Industries. Aside from offering free services, such as job referrals and placements, Homeboy

Industries hires, at any given time, 250 to 300 formerly incarcerated and at-risk youth through its various businesses: Homeboy Bakery, Homegirl Café & Catering, Homeboy Maintenance, Homeboy Merchandise, Homeboy Press and Homeboy Silkscreen & Embroidery.

Activism: Changing institutional policies and people's attitudes

> ...when I learned how the criminal justice system treats people who are already hurting, I began to reconnect with my voice, which naturally turned to activism.
>
> Susan Burton (interview, 2007)

During my time with the women, I met a number of activists and witnessed their mobilization on an array of issues, from the national to the local levels. In this section I share the stories of women who have become advocates for social change and their reasons for doing so. Following is a discussion of the organization All of Us or None and one of its major initiatives, Ban the Box, along with descriptions of various mobilizations taking place at the micro level.

Reasons for becoming activists

A growing number of formerly incarcerated women and men are speaking up and becoming politically active on their own behalf. Faced with impediments to reuniting with children, attaining gainful employment, and accessing affordable housing and social services, many of these individuals have organized against regressive policies and government and employment regulations. They have built movements in cities across the country. Organized formerly incarcerated people are petitioning, lobbying, marching, demonstrating, and speaking out against the injustices and inhumane treatment to which they have been subjected. They create leadership workshops and trainings, and they congregate at conferences and summits. They meet with policy makers, the media, social service providers, and criminal justice personnel in their attempts to remove the barriers they face as they rebuild their lives.

When asked why she became an activist, Susan Burton responded, "...I connected to my gut, my soul, my destiny. When people heal they get stronger and reconnect with themselves and are able to be more forthcoming and understanding of the larger system within which they live, which keep people oppressed" (interview on film, June 27, 2007).

Rhonda contemplatively replied, "I consider myself an activist because I have all this energy. Instead of holding all this fear inside, this is a positive

way to get it out. I do not have to sit in frustration anymore. I can use this as my voice; use my frustration that is bottled up inside of me. I get it out by doing something about it. This is my solution to the problem." (interview on film, January 18, 2008).

At a Peace & Justice Summit in the Watts area of South Los Angeles, Kim McGill, Executive Director of Youth Justice Coalition (filmed June 6, 2005) and the day's moderator began the Summit speaking to the importance of formerly incarcerated people's standing up to the continued systematic discrimination they experience daily and fighting for their rights.

> This is a very historic day. A lot of us have been told for a long time that us being arrested, locked up we should be ashamed, that we should be silent, that we should be invisible. Told we can't vote when we can. Told we can't be activists when we can. Embarrassed every time we are asked certain questions on housing or employment applications. And today is the beginning of the end of that. We are going to have pride for ourselves, our community, our families. We are no longer going to be invisible. We are going to fight back for the rights that all people deserve, including us.... I also think that this is historic because we have all been at a lot of speakouts where we have just spoken to each other, where we have told our stories and we cried on each others' shoulders. We have felt horrible about the conditions our communities are in. And our elected officials are in another room talking about things amongst themselves. Today we are here not just to talk to elected officials, but to hold them accountable to how they are going to help us fix the conditions we and our communities are living under. So I want to give a hand to all of the people here who came not only to listen but act.

Summit attendee Lorraine (interview on film, June 6, 2005) stated:

> I think it's very important that the formerly incarcerated organize. People who have done their time, who have been formerly incarcerated and are making an effort to change their lives and who just want to have their basic civil rights restored and human rights.... So we have to keep raising that and being in the face of policymakers (who)...are making policies that impact our community, but they're not the ones experiencing it. The policies that they are making are not based on the experiences that they've had. We have to keep having a voice. You keep putting it there in their face. You don't let them get off of it.... Policymakers make a lot of excuses about why...nothing will change. I think there is always room for change.

Maritza, with Youth Justice Coalition, speaks to her own activism (interview on film, December 19, 2007):

> I am a daughter of a formerly incarcerated woman. I know what it is like to be a child of a person locked up. They did not care that when my mother was locked up that I stayed with my sister and how I would eat. We fought my mother's case, and her charges were dropped. I am an organizer and an activist. I do what I can to support the youth on the inside. I talk to the parents. I was raised from the streets of South Central (Los Angeles) from the dirt. That pushes me to do the work that I do.

All of Us or None

Among the organizations founded by formerly incarcerated people is All of Us or None, a national organization committed to changing regressive policies toward those coming out of prison. At the Peace & Justice Summit mentioned earlier, organized by All of Us or None, Kim McGill (filmed June 6, 2005) spoke to the premise of the organization. All of Us or None members understand the need to work together among themselves as well as across communities and across cities. They see and feel the power of that unity and call on supporters to work alongside them to build a movement, a civil rights movement, a human rights movement. Kim McGill said:

> I think the most exciting thing about All of Us of None is that for a long time we have been made to fight for only a part of us. Maybe we should only be fighting for those of us with misdemeanors. Maybe we should only be concerned with people with low-level drug charges. Maybe we should only be concerned with young people. Maybe we should only be concerned about property crimes, etc.... We are here to say that none of us are free until all of us are free, and that the prison system, that is inhuman and unjust, must come down.

Michelle (interview on film, March 17, 2008) speaks of her activism:

> The reason I joined All of Us or None is because for so long I've been waiting for the system to help me out, to speak and address my issues, and what I've found out is that they haven't been. So I joined All of Us or None because it is an organization of formerly incarcerated prisoners, that they are fighting discrimination within the system and I go, "What better organization to join than All of Us or None because it speaks my story."

For Rhonda, All of Us or None "...is about hope, about change, it's about doing something for myself. When I found All of Us I had done some personal work on myself. I am a member of AA and had done fourth step.[2] And when I found All of Us, it was God saying, "Okay, now what are you going to do? I gave you a vehicle, now what are you going to do?" Rhonda continues, "All of Us or None is about change, bringing about community cohesiveness, building community support and standing up for our rights, and moving past the mistakes in our lives. Letting the past be the past." (interview on film, January 18, 2008).

Imprisoned for 24 years and out for only eight months at the time of our filming, Sandra, from Time for Change Foundation (interview on film, March 17, 2008) tearily stated:

> I may have been in prison but I am still someone, and I still can contribute if given a chance to be a part of not that stigma. I am more than just a W number, more than just a parolee. I am a person and I do want to give back to society.... I want to empower my sisters and brothers that are struggling along the way.... I know that if I am around positive people and we are going in the right direction, we can't go wrong.... What I like

> about All of Us or None is when formerly incarcerated people come together there is so much power and when you look around and see all the colors, you see a rainbow of people looking for a way to find a better way,...so we get strength from each other. We are learning ways to come together to collaborate and make a movement, and I am grateful to be a part of All of Us or None and Time for Change.

An important component of activism on behalf of formerly incarcerated people is to train members for leadership roles in the movement. To illustrate, having returned from a leadership training retreat (initially funded by the Soros Justice Fellowship and currently by individual donors) spearheaded by Susan Burton for formerly incarcerated women, Stormie spoke glowingly about the workshops she attended on organizational skill building, public speaking, and the dynamics of campaigns. The purpose of these retreats is to help shape leaders among the women themselves, so that they become activists on their own behalf. Wearing an All of Us or None t-shirt, Stormie (interview on film, November 12, 2007) eagerly shared what she learned on the retreat:

> We want to come out and be a part of our community, good children, good parents, be part of the PTA, etc., making careers for ourselves. But our past comes out to haunt us. We come out of prison. We have done our time. We have suffered the consequences. But now we come out and have trouble getting work, an apartment. (We) have difficulty rebuilding (our lives). Any background check places you in the position of being an undesirable. Even with skills, nobody pays attention to that. Give us a chance to be equal to everyone else, not special, just what everyone else has. All I needed is just a little bit of the door to open, just a little bit of help and look at where I am. We strive to drive and when we give up, what a loss to the world.

Ban the Box

Since the beginning of its existence in 2003, members of All of Us or None across the country have worked on a number of fronts and moved many of their demands forward: Voting Rights for All, Clean Slate, Community Giveback, realignment, and fighting expansion of prisons. One of their major campaigns has been Ban the Box Campaign, discussed earlier. The purpose of this campaign is to remove or, at the very least, reposition the inquiry "Have you ever been convicted of a felony?" from employment applications. As discussed above, the general consensus is that checking the box on employment applications is a major factor in keeping formerly incarcerated people from reentering the job market.

Finally, in California, the mobilization of formerly incarcerated and their supporters has paid off. After many years of the community's efforts, the state passed a Ban-the-Box policy in October 2013, Assembly Bill 218 (signed

[2]The fourth step is a component of the 12-step Alcoholic Anonymous program. The key passage in Step 4 is "make a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves," which involves reviewing one's life and any unprincipled and harmful actions in which one has participated.

by Governor Jerry Brown) which took effect July 1, 2014. This bill applies to all state public employment, removing the question "Have you even been convicted of a felony" from city, county, and state job applications. Leading the charge for the passing of this legislation was All of Us or None, along with the National Employment Law Project and Legal Services for Prisoners with Children, all of whom worked long and hard, waging tenacious Ban-the-Box campaigns. It took years and many meetings and speaking out, turning sentiments around, educating the public, politicians, and the media to see the efficacy of this policy. California now joins major cities across the country (Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, New Haven, New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C.), which have all adopted Ban-the-Box ordinances.

Micro mobilizations

Aside from the national and regional mobilizations taking place, I witnessed women mobilizing at the micro-organizational level on a variety of issues, from demonstrating and protesting against the incarceration of elderly and sickly women, to a three-day March for Respect against the locking-up of youth and for the closure of California Youth Authority, to a project that offers resources for women living on the streets.

An action organized by Youth Justice Coalition, the March for Respect, began on Sunday, December 16, 2007, at the Sylmar's Barry Nidorf Juvenile Hall Facilities for Youth and ended approximately 45 miles and three days later at the Norwalk Correctional Facilities for Youth. The closing ceremony for the march was a candlelight vigil with approximately 50 to 60 youth and two elders (an African American woman and a Latina who together offered their blessings through ritual). The vigil concluded with a moving chant by the youth, with a passage taken from Assata Shakur's (1987) autobiography, "It is our duty to fight. It is our duty to win. We must love each other. We must protect each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains" (filmed, December 19, 2007).

Another example of the "smaller" efforts to create change on behalf of formerly incarcerated women took place at the Harbour Area Halfway Houses. On one of our visits, Monica Stel discussed the frustration she and the residents felt as result of the lack of services and resources available for women who fall into prostitution. An exasperated Monica said (interview on film, November 12, 2007):

> A couple of times I have tried to get someone to come in to speak to the women about prostitution, but there are no resources.... There is nothing for prostitution (just) Prostitutes Anonymous, based in Las Vegas.... A lot of people do not want to hear this. They feel that the women have a "choice," but I am not buying it. Women who have been sexually abused, addicted, in an oppressive culture that sees women as sexual beings, they do not have a choice. What kind of choice is that

between desperate loneliness and desperate affection?... Prostitution is just a part of how they live when living as an addict.

Monica and the residents at Harbour channeled their frustration into a mobilization effort. She explained what they decided to do:

> So over the years, I heard a lot of stories, and a couple times we had residents there (at) a certain area of Long Beach. They stroll around PCH (Pacific Coast Highway) .... I tried once to get one of our residents (who was out) there.... The whole scene creeped me out. I could not protect her... I would go by the Monterrey Hotel...on Cherry and Anaheim (an intersection in Long Beach). It symbolizes hopelessness. I came home, and the residents decided to do something about it, and that is how the Hotel Project began.
>
> Here is our plan so far.... The residents made a list that includes most of the motels that span PCH from Santa Fe (street) to Cherry. We plan to make up resource cards to be placed at the motels that will give women numbers to call, contacts to make, hope, and the possibility of safety. We are also starting a support group based on a 12-step format for women who are ready and able to grab onto a lifeline.

Conclusion

> When you treat people with dignity and respect and work toward compassionate understanding and education, you get the results of that.... When you treat people abusively. When you power over and perpetuate against them and make them feel less than, worse than, or don't give them the resources they need to survive, you get the results of that. We are all responsible for each other. There's no other way to do it.
>
> Monica Stel (interview, June 2007)

Solutions to the rebuilding of women's lives are, in some instances, simple and in others, more complex, yet in all cases solutions appear elusive to the powers-that-be, those who make laws, those who enforce and, in particular, those who benefit from current policies and laws that govern the living conditions of formerly incarcerated women. In the years I worked with the women in Southern California and with the people who work on the front lines assisting as much as they can, I was privy to their visions of what can take place to resolve the impasses many women encounter when they reenter society. I heard plausible visions that were met with bureaucratic inertia and societal indifference at best, and with fear, at worst.

As for California's new statewide Ban the Box law, we have yet to determine how effectively this state law will be implemented, although it is a step in the right direction. Nevertheless, this new California Ban the Box legislation remains a partial solution. For one thing, we need to address employment in the private sectors where, in fact, most formerly incarcerated search for jobs, just as we need to expand social services, such as education, job training, health services, recovery homes, and affordable housing. Ultimately,

we need to stop incarcerating people for nonviolent, drug-related crimes and activities and offer economic and employment opportunities that make sense and keep families and communities intact.

Beyond these reforms and shifts in institutional procedures, key women involved in this study voiced their positions as prison abolitionists. While a number of people dismiss this philosophy or find it abhorrent, it remains imperative to listen carefully to this perspective:

> We need to change the whole criminal justice system. What we have now is retributive justice. So if anybody does anything to break the peace, to rupture the fabric of society, we want to punish them for it. So what we do is send them to prison. We subject them to conditions that induce a mental illness that results in postincarceration syndrome, and we don't have any supports for them when they leave. There are other methods of justice. In South Africa they have restorative justice, and what that assumes is we are all brothers and sisters and that we all want to help each other and we all want to live together in society in a peaceful way, and if somebody breaks that bond you bring the persons who are the perpetrators together with their victims, together with other people in their community to figure out what happened and what needs to change so that it won't happen again (M. Montenegro, interview on film, June 6, 2005).

In this article, I have examined the experiences of formerly incarcerated women who participated in my study and the difficulties in and obstacles to their recovery. I've shared their stories of their attempts to remove the chains that keep them from rebuilding their lives. At the heart of this article are the activists who are taking the lead in their struggle for social justice so as to gain access to basic rights. Applying O'Brien's concept of empowerment framework, these activists are marshaling their internal resources to change the external socioeconomic resources for themselves and on their families' behalf.

We must nonetheless understand that remaining an activist creates a dilemma because doing so most often means that one is working on a volunteer basis, which is a precarious situation. Creating social change takes considerable amount of time and a long-term commitment, which is a difficult avenue to take when one is unemployed or working at a low-income, dead-end job or when one is fighting the courts for custody of one's children and encountering the many institutional barriers to reentry discussed in this article. First and foremost among formerly incarcerated women's concerns is financial security. Many times, to sustain their activism, they need to have that financial security for themselves and their families.

It is hoped that the experiences and the actions by the women in this study will shed light on the factors that facilitate reentry as well as inspire and instruct us all about the strategies and organizing efforts that work toward those ends. Key to the women's successful reentry is the role of their parole officers, social workers, and other service providers. The message to

professional service providers, from the activists who have spoken to me, is that we must all work together to build this movement to change the criminal justice landscape, keeping in mind that building a movement on behalf of the incarcerated and the formerly incarcerated must include their active participation. To move in that direction in a clear and unwavering way, we all need to address seriously the issues of racism, classism, sexism, and the general fear in society of individuals with prison records. One of the first steps toward that goal is for professionals to examine their relationships with their clients and transform the covert and well as the overt forms of (often gender-, sexual identity-, class- and race-based) inequalities, and to treat people with whom they work as human beings, not just clients, so as to build their legitimacy and respect.

Activists are working toward liberating themselves from the societal obstacles that cause the cycle of addiction and incarceration. In this article, formerly incarcerated women speak of futures for which they continue to strive, futures that are fair and just. They envision a society where they will no longer have to ask, "When will the punishment end?"

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Stel, M. (2007, November 12). Interview on film.

Stormie B. (2007, October 19). Interview on film.

Stormie B. (2007, November 12) Interview on film.

Theresa C. (2006, January 18). Interview on film.

Tonya. (2007, November 11). Interview on film.

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Appendix B

Harbour Area Halfway Houses:
(562) 434–0036

Homeboy Industries and Homegirl Café:
(323) 526–1254
www.homeboy-industries.org

A New Way of Life Re-Entry Project:
(323) 563–3575
www.anewwayoflife.org

Time for Change Foundation:
(909) 886–2994
www.timeforchangefoundation.org

Community Coalition for Substance Abuse, Prevention and Treatment:
(323) 750–9087
www.cocosouthla.org

Southern California Library:
(323) 759–6063
www.socallib.org

Youth Justice Coalition:
(323) 235–4243
www.youth4justice.org