



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 42
Issue 2 June

Article 5

2015

Categories of Exclusion: The Transformation of Formerly Incarcerated Women into “Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents” in Welfare Processing

Megan Welsh

City University of New York, mwelsh@mail.sdsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Welsh, Megan (2015) "Categories of Exclusion: The Transformation of Formerly Incarcerated Women into “Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents” in Welfare Processing," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 42 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol42/iss2/5>

This Article is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

Categories of Exclusion: The Transformation of Formerly Incarcerated Women into “Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents” in Welfare Processing

MEGAN WELSH

City University of New York Graduate Center

For people who have just been released from incarceration, the work of getting out and resuming life on the outside often includes numerous institutional contacts. Applying for and maintaining public assistance—cash aid and food stamps, commonly referred to as welfare—is a central component of what I call “reentry work.” I argue that discourses around welfare and punishment have perpetuated the erasure of formerly incarcerated women’s experiences. Utilizing an institutional ethnographic perspective, I show how the work of applying for and maintaining welfare is organized around a standardized textual discourse of children, and women as caretakers of children. Formerly incarcerated women do not fit easily into such a category, thus they are systematically excluded from the assistance they need. I examine the multiple layers of unrecognized work juggled by these women, and suggest avenues for welfare reform.

Key words: Women’s incarceration; welfare; General Assistance; institutional ethnography.

A growing vein of research has examined the “collateral consequences” of incarceration: difficulties such as restrictions on voting (Mauer, 2002), housing (Rubenstein & Mukamal, 2002), and employment (Pager, 2003, 2007), as well as restitution (Dickman, 2009) that must be paid before privileges such as having a driver’s license can be fully restored. Critical scholars have argued that the accumulation of such restrictions renders the full reintegration of former prisoners back into society nearly impossible (Beckett & Western, 2001; Maruna, 2011). It is a sad—but unsurprising—fact that the rate of return to prison for someone who has previously been incarcerated is

quite high: nationally, roughly 40 percent of former prisoners return to prison within three years (Pew Center on the States, 2011). The trying conditions under which formerly incarcerated people must struggle to rebuild their lives after incarceration are made even worse by the various institutions they must navigate. As I will show, formerly incarcerated people do not fit neatly into institutional categories. Dorothy Smith has written about the “practical interchange between an inexhaustibly messy and different and indefinite real world and the bureaucratic and professional system which controls and acts upon it” (1975, p. 97). This interchange informs the problematic I examine here: how the act of standardizing people’s lives for the sake of welfare processing excludes women whose lives are already “inexhaustibly messy.”

Using an institutional ethnographic approach, I draw on formerly incarcerated women’s accounts to show how the work of applying for and maintaining welfare is organized using a standardized textual discourse of children, and women as caretakers of children. I argue that current welfare policy systematically erases the difficulties of formerly incarcerated women, many of whom are actually mothers but are not categorically defined as such for the purposes of welfare eligibility determination. Thus, as my data reveal, recently-released women tend to exist in the liminal space between being an adult “without dependents” and being a mother.

In advancing this argument, in no way do I contend that women with custody of their children have it any easier in the welfare system. Rather, my aim is to pry open the literature about women on welfare, which currently is coterminous with the literature about *mothers* on welfare, and make space for women who do not neatly fit into this category. As I will show, the present welfare-to-work system, which critical scholars have attributed to a neoliberal “war on dependence” (Katz, 2001; Miller, 2013), ignores the ways in which incarceration history makes future employment more tenuous. I argue that restrictive welfare policies punish women who have already “done their time” in prison. The harsh time limits on the assistance they receive, the lack of access to useful work training opportunities, and in many cases, ineligibility for food stamps, all contribute to a growing nexus of “invisible punishments” (Travis, 2002; Welsh & Rajah, 2014) which prolong and amplify

the repercussions for criminal involvement far beyond the formal sentence received.

In the sections that follow, I first consider how formerly incarcerated women's situations render them invisible in both the feminist welfare and penal state literatures: the former neglects women who do not fit into the welfare category of caretakers of children, while the latter conceptualizes "prisoner reentry" as a process experienced exclusively by men. I then explicate the social relations organizing women's work in seeking and maintaining welfare. I present a typology of the women in my sample by the assistance they are eligible to receive. I then examine the multiple layers of unrecognized work juggled by these women: the work of sorting through what assistance one might be eligible for based on one's criminal record; the futile work of participating in required welfare-to-work programming that fails to include specific training for individuals with criminal records; the work of weighing the value of meager welfare assistance against competing demands associated with regaining custody of children; and the textually-mediated work of presenting oneself as a "good" mother in the welfare office.

The Exclusionary Discourses of the Penal and Welfare States

For as long as governments have provided assistance to the poor, policymakers have sought to distinguish between the "worthy" and "unworthy" poor (McCarty, Aussenberg, Falk, & Carpenter, 2013; Piven & Cloward, 1993). Throughout the history of the American welfare system, this has meant a complex maze of federal, state, and local policies that reflect prevailing societal expectations about both family structure and compliant behavior (Abramovitz, 1996; McCarty et al., 2013; Smith, 1993). A vast—and vastly important—field of critical welfare scholarship has shed light on the myriad ways in which welfare policies have marginalized single mothers and people of color, permanently confining them to an under-caste of low-wage labor (Abramovitz, 1996; Butler, Corbett, Bond, & Hastedt, 2008; Edin & Lein, 1997; Solomon, 2003; Weigt, 2006). Yet welfare discourse is very much shaped around those who are eligible to receive it. As critical scholarship on mothering

discourse has shown (Brown, 2006; Weigt, 2006), worthiness for receiving institutional assistance is typically tied to children, and to women as “good” caretakers of children. Feminist scholars have thus paid little attention to the “safety net of last resort”: state-administered General Assistance (GA) programs for poor adults who do not qualify for other forms of assistance.

Applicants for GA include people who do not have custody of minor children, people who are not sufficiently disabled to qualify for the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program, or who are waiting on a disability determination, and those who are not elderly (Schott & Cho, 2011). Under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, the federal welfare policy term for an individual who might qualify for GA is “Able-Bodied Adult Without Dependents” (ABAWD) (United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2014). Individuals categorized as such are not eligible for federal cash assistance under the current program (Temporary Aid to Needy Families, or TANF). Instead, they may only receive food stamps (formally known as SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) for three months out of every three years (USDA, 2014). Because there is no federally-funded cash safety net for individuals categorized as ABAWD, they are at the whim of state provision of such aid, which varies widely. Thirty states provide some assistance, but only 12 states do not require recipients to have a documented reason for being unemployed—typically, a disability (Schott & Cho, 2011).

In her seminal piece on the politics of need interpretation in welfare, Nancy Fraser (1987) argues that welfare, through its discursive framing as a “feminine” system, constructs its clients as dependents in need of therapeutic intervention. This construction is reinforced by positioning women—the large majority of welfare recipients—as caretakers of children. Fraser contrasts this with “masculine” systems of aid such as unemployment insurance, in which men are the majority of clients. Recipients of masculine forms of aid are constructed as participants in the workforce and thus as having “rights” instead of “needs.” Fraser’s typology has a gap, however: individuals who are categorized as ABAWD and who therefore do not neatly fit into either type of system. Because of their

precarious situations, formerly incarcerated individuals often seek out GA, which is neither a conventionally “feminine” nor “masculine” system, per Fraser’s definition. Although nationwide demographic data on GA recipients are not available, state-level data indicate that a slim majority of GA recipients are men (Shannon, 2013). Thus, female recipients of GA, and formerly incarcerated women in particular, are rendered invisible because they are not receiving the expected form of aid for their gender. This invisibility has only been considered in passing by other researchers (Brown & Bloom, 2009).

A similar erasure of women’s experiences occurs in the critical literature on punishment. Contact with the criminal justice system has become a routine site of interaction with the government (Weaver & Lerman, 2010). Yet, although women have comprised the fastest-growing prison demographic for the past three decades (Frost, Greene, & Pranis, 2006; Mauer, 2013), discourses around incarceration—and prisoner reentry in particular—are predominantly about men (Richie, 2012). Loïc Wacquant, a leading critic of prisoner reentry discourse, reinforces this “separate spheres” notion, as this passage illustrates:

Indeed, the renovated reentry chain is for lower-class criminal men, *the penal counterpart and complement to punitive workfare* as the new face of public aid for derelict women and children—who happen to be their mothers, sisters, wives, and offspring, since the welfare and criminal justice arms of the state fasten onto the same households located at the foot of the socioracial hierarchy according to a gendered division of control. (2010, p. 616, emphasis in original)

Wacquant recognizes an important fact about America’s “prison nation” (Richie, 2012): that there is a convergence of the penal and welfare states in the lives of poor people of color. However, his argument positions women as bystanders to mass incarceration, when in reality, thousands of women are themselves being swept up into the criminal justice system every year. In this way, the welfare and penal states are functioning to co-produce the exclusion of formerly incarcerated women.

The institutional ethnographic perspective is useful for unveiling the marginalization perpetuated by these discourses. Allison Griffith (1998), for example, employed this approach to reveal how she and Dorothy Smith, through their situations as single parents, were constructed as “deviant” in the relationship between their families and their children’s schools (p. 371). In a similar way, I seek to highlight here the ways in which women with incarceration histories are positioned as deviants, both in trying to present themselves as eligible for assistance and, for those who are mothers, in presenting themselves as “good” parents. It is only through the actual activities that people carry out—and the specific knowledge and experiences they have of doing so—that we can begin to understand how people’s lives are socially organized (Smith, 2009). Yet these important forms of knowing are often erased through the use of generalized categories that remove lived experience from the account (Smith, 1983, 1987, 1993). The narratives of the women interviewed for this project reveal this erasure, and suggest possibilities for change.

The Social Organization of Women’s Reentry Work

Gabrielle is a quiet, 34-year-old Latina with a warm smile. She had been a “lifer,” serving almost 17 years in a California state prison before being released on parole. At the time I first met her, Gabrielle had been out for almost a year, but was still living in temporary housing, sharing a cramped three-bedroom house with three other women who had four young children among them. Gabrielle’s description of her first two weeks after getting out of prison were echoed by the other women who participated in this study:

When I first got out, I had a lot of different appointments that I had to go to. My first week out, it was real frustrating because I needed to go down to the county and get my food stamps and cash aid, and because I’d never had to do any of that, I didn’t know what to do. It took almost two weeks for everything to get situated because I didn’t have the right paperwork or I wasn’t filling things out. There was information missing. They told me I had to be in the county 14 days before they could process anything. And they knew... ‘cause they

asked, 'where have you been for the last 16 and a half years?' I said, 'in prison.' And so they said, 'well, we need you to be a resident of the county' before I could receive any kind of aid. So they gave me emergency food stamps, but they didn't give me the cash. So when the 14 days were up, then I had to go back and redo all the paperwork. It was just a hassle.

Gabrielle's experience points to an all too common irony for people coming home from prison: the disjuncture between what she needs to do to survive now that she has been released, and the institutional restrictions that impede her survival. The welfare office is typically one of the first institutional contacts a recently released individual makes, yet as Gabrielle learned, she needed to first establish "residency."

As a single woman with no dependents, Gabrielle was a member of the growing ranks of individuals who must seek state cash aid (GA) allocated at the county level. Unlike the food stamps she was able to get immediately, GA is not provided through federal funding. In the county in which Gabrielle was applying, the standard processing time for a GA application is 30 days. This means that, including the 14 days she had to wait to establish residency, Gabrielle had to wait up to six weeks after her release from prison to receive cash aid. Gabrielle and her fellow Californians are actually relatively fortunate: California is one of the 12 states that offer GA to individuals classified as ABAWD without requiring that applicants prove they are unemployable because of a disability. Still, the maximum amount of cash aid available to ABAWD-classified adults in California is less than one-quarter of the federal poverty line for an individual. There are strict time limits, too: because welfare policy classifies Gabrielle as "able-bodied" (employable), she could only receive this cash assistance—a maximum of \$221 per month in the county where this study took place—for nine months out of the year, as long as she participated in a job training program (Schott & Cho, 2011). As a point of comparison, individuals with dependent children can receive cash aid through TANF for up to 48 months in California, with no set time limit on food stamps (California Department of Social Services, 2011; Schott & Pavletti, 2011).

In addition to accessing public assistance, recently released

individuals like Gabrielle must: find permanent housing; comply with community supervision requirements (parole or probation); seek and obtain health and mental health care and substance abuse counseling; reunite with family and friends; pursue visitation with and custody of children; and find employment. Elsewhere, I have referred to these tasks collectively as “reentry work” (Welsh & Rajah, 2014). With the exception, perhaps, of the last task—finding employment—these essential forms of work are not recognized as such, arguably because they do not directly contribute to reshaping formerly incarcerated people as productive members of society. Rather, these unrecognized forms of labor are commonly considered to be part of the price one pays for being poor and engaging in criminal behavior.

Research Approach: Beginning from Women’s Experiences

In March of 2012, I began research for this project by volunteering for an organization that provides housing and social services for women coming home from prison and jail in a large metropolitan area of California. Over the course of the following year and a half, I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with a purposively-selected sample of 24 women, in addition to roughly 400 hours of participant observation. As I have described elsewhere (Welsh & Rajah, 2014), I presented myself to the organization and the women it served as a doctoral student–researcher who also has social work credentials. Because the organization, a small non-profit agency, lacks the resources to have a social worker who could provide transportation for the women’s many appointments in the first few weeks of getting out, I began to fill this role.

Prior to interviews with and observations of each woman, I explained that I was interested in the various forms of work that women had to do to reestablish their lives after incarceration. Similar to other institutional ethnographers’ experiences, I found that my conceptualization of the reentry process as work was readily accepted and understood by the women, who appreciated that I recognized their work as such. As Mykhalovskiy & McCoy (2002) note, “talking about ‘work’

stimulated rich conversation since the term implies forms of effort and intentionality easily recognized by people in their everyday experience” (p. 26). In framing my interests in this way, my conversations with the women created a space for them to reflect on their reentry work in a way that was otherwise unavailable to them. Additionally, I told each woman that I had experience and training as a social worker and was willing and able to help her navigate various systems in any way I could, should she want my help. The women became local, or “standpoint informants” (Bisailon, 2012) who kept the research anchored in their everyday experiences. Several of the women took ongoing, active roles in the project of their own volition, calling me when they had various appointments that they thought would be interesting for me to observe.

Table 1. Welfare Eligibility Classifications of a Sample of 24 Formerly Incarcerated Women

Welfare Aid Category (# of women in sample within this category)	Informants
Banned from receiving food stamps because of drug felony (10)	Alice, Carina, Jessie
Receiving GA (cash aid); categorized as ABAWD; no minor children or not pursuing custody (16)	Gabrielle, Alice
Receiving GA (cash aid); categorized as ABAWD; actively seeking custody of children (4)	Jessie
Receiving TANF (cash aid and food stamps); have custody of children (4)	Gabrielle,* Carina

*Gabrielle became pregnant with and gave birth to her first child during the course of the study.

For the purposes of my analysis here, I sorted the women in my study by their welfare categories of need (see Table 1). During my time with the women, four fell under the category of TANF: they had custody of their children and thus were receiving aid through federally-funded welfare programs (including Gabrielle, who later had a child of her own). Nine of the women were mothers of adult children, while another four were actively seeking custody of young children they had had prior to their most recent incarceration. These women, along

with the seven women who either did not have children or had chosen not to pursue custody, were only eligible for GA, as well as three months of “emergency” food stamps. Thus, they are categorized as ABAWD. At the time of their first interview or observation with me, all of the women in my study were in the process of applying for, or were already receiving, some form of aid. However, as I will examine here, 10 of the women were prohibited from receiving food stamps for themselves and thus could only receive GA or assistance for their children.

Category 1. “You Can Never Eat”: The Work of Applying for Welfare with a Drug Felony “Scarlet Letter”

The welfare reform legislation that took effect in 1996 was crafted at a time when crime rates of drug-related violence in particular were at their peak. Concern about drugs and their deleterious effects on communities began to replace a focus on normative family structure. Although crime rates have subsequently declined, crime-related welfare restrictions remain, and in some places, they are expanding (Mauer & McCalmont, 2013; McCarty et al., 2013; Soss, Fording, & Schram, 2011). A complicating factor in considering such restrictions is that they are inconsistent across federal, state, and local programs. As McCarty et al. (2013) note:

This variation may be considered important, in that it reflects a stated policy goal of local discretion. However, the variation may also be considered problematic if it leads to confusion among eligible recipients as to what assistance they are eligible for or if the variation is seen as inequitable. (p. 2)

Confusion was common among the women I interviewed. For some, policies had changed while they were incarcerated; others had lived elsewhere prior to their arrest in California, or they had never applied for public assistance before. Thus, many were unaware that California is one of 34 states that ban individuals convicted of a drug sales felony from receiving food stamps (Maurer & McCalmont, 2013). Alice, an energetic 55-year-old Black woman, describes it this way:

They make you grovel, you know? I had to go apply

for [welfare] to have some kind of money... But they asked me what was I in prison for, I told 'em drugs, and they told me I wasn't eligible for food stamps, which I didn't understand... if you have certain drug convictions, and I think it's like intent to sell, well, mine was a sales. You can't eat. You can never eat. What has that got to do with you eating? That's what I don't get. What does food stamps have to do with drugs? Because they give you, what, \$221 a month? If I was gonna buy drugs, I'd buy it with the cash. Now the hard thing for me is the fact that I've been in prison and it's behind me. Looking for a job. And then, every place you go, they're gonna do a background check. So that means that you're still doing time... Like I got a red scarlet letter on my chest. Now in school, my teacher knows I've been in prison and my classmates 'cause I don't hide it. But looking for a job, I don't go and disclose that information unless they ask. And I have disclosed that information and I've had people that tell me 'well, let me talk to my supervisor about it.' But I know that when I walk out the door they throw my application basically in the trash.

Alice, who was a nurse for 20 years prior to her incarceration, recognizes that although she desperately wants to return to the workforce and support herself, her employment opportunities are severely limited because she is "marked" with a criminal record (Pager, 2003, 2007). When Alice applied for welfare, the large stack of forms she filled out contained a questionnaire entitled the "Food Stamp Program Qualifying Drug Felon Addendum." The first section asked about any drug felony convictions Alice had incurred since welfare reform took effect in 1996, and listed the convictions that could render her ineligible for aid. Another section asked if she had completed, participated in, enrolled in, or been placed on a waiting list for a "government-recognized drug treatment program." Checking 'yes' for any of these items could have absolved Alice of her drug conviction and made her eligible for food stamps (though a threatening statement about the harsh prosecution of welfare fraud warned her not to lie). Yet because of an earlier conviction, Alice was ineligible for such a treatment program.

The textualization of Alice's everyday experiences facilitates the transformation of those experiences into ideological narratives. Smith (1987) has described this process as the ideological circle: a textually-mediated practice of extracting (and abstracting) facts from real experience, and then using these disembodied facts to explain and organize experience. The ideological circle involves selecting from an account only the details that fit within the context of an existing ideological scheme (see also Smith, 1990). In Alice's narrative, she wonders how her drug felony is connected to eating. Alice did not have a substance abuse issue that would make her eligible for a treatment program; she had been convicted for selling drugs, not using them. In the ideological account, it is not the fact of her prior behavior—which is inevitably embedded in a complex social-organizational context and personal history—that matters. Rather, it is the fact that she is a convicted drug seller. As someone who fits into this category, she is denied assistance.

Category 2. Welfare-to-work and the Problem of the Criminal Record

The central contribution of an institutional ethnographic inquiry is to “trace how women *participate* in these discourses in ways that subordinate them... [and to] map out the ways these discourses fit into a constellation of social relations organizing experience and knowledge” (Weigt, 2006, p. 335, emphasis in original). It is to this task that I turn here.

The welfare system, which still required Alice to look for employment in exchange for her cash aid, fails to recognize the additional burden that having a criminal record adds for an individual looking for work. The effectiveness of welfare-to-work programs is questionable, even for individuals without a criminal record (Butler et al., 2008; Harris & Parisi, 2008). Of the twenty women in my study who were receiving GA, none found jobs through the welfare-to-work program in which they were mandated to participate. It is important to note that none of the four women with children found jobs through the analogous job program for poor parents, though these women were self-admittedly less focused on finding work than on finding affordable, stable housing for themselves and their children. Arguably, the women who had custody of their children were

able to have this focus because they had assistance for a longer period of time. Alice, who has a grown son and one granddaughter, and thus was classified as ABAWD, describes the job search process like this:

What they do is they give you a list of jobs and you have to have so many 'points' at the end of the week. So you pick through them, and you have to do so many job searches a day. And you have to show them that you've done them. If it's a walk-in place you have to get a business card. And if you do it on the computer then you have to have paperwork. So that's why I bought a printer, so that I could do my job searches online and show them that I uploaded my resume. Then I bring them back the receipt to let them know that, actually I would rather have a job than to go over there and stand in the long line for two hours to get in [to apply for welfare]... They tell you how to dress, you know, a lot of people don't have clothes. They give you a \$50 voucher to go spend on a shirt or pants or shoes or whatever you need. And then they tell you to go look. And they give you these jobs and some of them are far away and some of them are places that likely aren't gonna hire you. And they have, like, Pizza Hut, you know what I'm saying?

At the time I interviewed her, Alice was finishing up training in basic computer programs such as Microsoft Word so that she could become an administrative assistant. Even for these types of jobs, a clean criminal record is often required. As of our last conversation, Alice had not found work and was planning to move out of state once she got off parole to live with relatives.

In her book about carework, DeVault (1992) observes that, through the performance of unrecognized forms of labor, "women are continually recruited into social relations that produce their own subordination" (p. 13). In speaking with Alice, I found support for DeVault's observation. Poor people with criminal records are swept up into a welfare-to-work system that fails to prepare them for a competitive job market in which having a criminal record is an additional hindrance. These individuals are then required to complete a

certain number of fruitless job searches in order to continue receiving assistance. Women like Alice, because of their criminal records and their categorization as “adults without dependents,” are thus set on a trajectory that is quite different from their counterparts with children. Alice has nine months to find a job before she loses her GA, which, at \$221 per month, is not enough for her to find stable housing. After three months off GA, she can reapply, but would have to also go through the welfare-to-work program all over again—a time-consuming process that yields little actual benefit.

Category 3. “They Want You To Do So Much”:

Formerly Incarcerated Mothers Juggle Competing Demands

Jessie, a young Latina, left her son in the care of her aunt when she went to prison. While in prison, Jessie began receiving letters from the family court that her aunt wanted to adopt her son. Distraught over the prospect of losing her son, Jessie got her court-appointed attorney to file a petition opposing the adoption. When she was released, Jessie was able to persuade the court to grant her reunification services, under which she could have gradually more contact with her son while completing parenting classes. Jessie describes her situation like this:

What sucks is that in my case, I’ve never beaten my son, never neglected my son, none of that. The only thing that was—I mean it was wrong, but I went to prison. And it was for something that I did two years prior [to having him]. So it was from my past. I was clean and I wasn’t doing drugs. And they came in my house and they got me. They had me under investigation for a long time before. So I went to prison for that, there was nothing really I could do. So my thing with my son... there’s women that beat their kids or neglect their kids and that don’t feed their kids and stuff like that. And they give them back. And I was like, ‘oh my god, they’re not gonna give me my little boy back because I went to prison and I was there for such a short period of time?’ But I went to every court date and I’m doing what I have to do.

Jessie struggles to reconcile her identity as a good mother and the identity the state has imposed on her as a criminal. This is particularly difficult for her because she was sober and not engaged in criminal behavior at the time she had her son. McMahan (1995) has referred to women who experience this conflict as “maternally unorthodox” (p. 264): through their criminal involvement, they have violated not just the law, but also expected female behavior. This conflict is quite common for women with incarceration histories: over 70 percent of incarcerated women are the primary caretakers of children prior to their imprisonment (Snell, 1994); many, like Jessie, must fight to regain custody of their children once they get out.

Jessie, who was living in the temporary housing provided by the reentry program when I met her, made reuniting with her son her highest priority. However, in order to stay at the program, she needed to apply for GA and food stamps so that she could pay rent and contribute to food expenses at the house she shared with four other women. Jessie, like Alice, learned at the welfare office that she was ineligible for food stamps because of her drug conviction. As other researchers have pointed out, the food stamp ban not only hurts the individuals who cannot receive assistance, but also harms organizations that provide shared housing to formerly incarcerated people (Mauer & McCalmont, 2013; Rubenstein & Mukamal, 2002). During the application process, Jessie also learned about the work requirements for GA, and discovered a conflict between her primary goal and the work she would need to do to receive assistance:

I went to the [welfare-to-work] assessment. I signed the papers and did all that. That was not really a lot. But then they started talking about how I have to go every day at such and such times and that it might interfere with my parenting classes. I decided if that happens then they're gonna they keep their money because that's more important to me. They want you to go for two months, every day, Monday through Friday. I'm like, 'no, I can't do it.' They want you to do so much. It's understandable 'cause I guess they do help you get jobs, and that's cool, but right now, where I'm at, I'm not able to.

Jessie's narrative pinpoints a key difficulty that many reentering women experience: because she is classified as "without dependents," she is expected to make finding a job her highest priority. Thus, job training sessions are scheduled for her with no consideration for her other obligations, which in addition to her parenting classes, also include drug testing, psychotherapy, Narcotics Anonymous meetings, and meeting with her probation officer. Jessie often had to take two to three buses to get to each of her appointments. Ironically, she is forced to choose her parenting classes and other tasks over getting the assistance she needs to pay her rent. Jessie's refusal to participate in the welfare regime eventually paid off. Because she was released from prison under a new program for people convicted of low-level crimes, Jessie's probation officer was able to arrange to pay for her housing for six months while she completed her parenting classes.

Category 4. The Textual Transformation of the Deviant Mother

In the following passage, texts mediate Carina's transformation from a "good" mother into a deviant mother with a drug conviction:

I was six months pregnant with my daughter. Before you can be on [TANF] you have to be six months pregnant. I went to apply. You wait there all damn day. They finally called me and I go into the interview room with 10 people in there interviewing in those little booths. It's loud in there and she's looking over my paperwork and saying 'your name is such and such,' going through all this stuff, 'how pregnant are you?' They get to the part where you have to write your convictions down and you can't lie to the county because they fingerprint you. As soon as I get to that part, it's 'this is how much we'll give you' and 'we're not giving you no money while you're pregnant, only food stamps, and unless the baby is born this is how much money you will get.'

Carina notes that the tone of her interaction with the eligibility worker shifted markedly as soon as the worker saw her convictions. As Ridzi (2009) and Taylor (2013) have observed, welfare eligibility workers and case managers tend to

use the copious amounts of paperwork they must fill out for surveillance purposes, not to provide services. Because she was six months pregnant, Carina knew that she was eligible for more assistance through TANF than she had been through GA. However, because of her drug convictions, she was only eligible for aid for her baby, not for her. Thus, the increase was less than a hundred dollars per month.

Carina's disclosure of her drug convictions on her application form "activates" a complex set of ruling relations which coordinate her work and that of her eligibility worker. These relations correspond with prevailing discourses about motherhood, which dictate that women should be law-abiding citizens who are able to work to provide for their children. Women like Jessie and Carina, by virtue of their "messy" lives, do not fit neatly into the institutional categories that determine their worthiness for welfare.

The multiple layers of work that women like Jessie and Carina must undertake are invisible in the current regime. In Jessie's case, this forces her to choose between the money she needs to live and the work she needs to do to get her son back. By limiting the amount of money Carina can receive while she is pregnant, the welfare system conveys that it is only concerned about the well-being of her unborn child, and thus ensures that Carina can eat while she is pregnant. Such ironies are not limited to the welfare system. Elsewhere, I have written about women's difficulties in obtaining permanent housing: Gabrielle, who became pregnant while she was at the reentry program, was told that because of her criminal record, she would not be a worthy candidate for government-subsidized housing until she had given birth to her son (Welsh & Rajah, 2014).

Conclusion

I have argued here that the welfare and punishment discourses that claim to speak for women and former prisoners have systematically erased the circumstances of formerly incarcerated women. I have sought to shed light on this erasure by showing how the categorization of formerly incarcerated women as "Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents" in welfare eligibility determinations excludes them from the very

assistance they need to demonstrate that they are reformed citizens—and for many, that they are “good” mothers. This categorization sets women up to juggle multiple and often conflicting forms of unrecognized work.

The research presented here raises important questions about welfare policy: what role (if any) should the welfare system play in the prisoner reentry process? How can welfare programs account for people’s complicated lives post-incarceration? My analysis points to the need for broad reforms that make women’s well-being central, alongside—instead of at the margins of—the needs of children. Politically, crafting a more inclusive welfare system means rejecting neoliberal discourses around personal responsibility. As DeVault (1992) argues, “by locating blame with individuals rather than structures, these discourses legitimate the hierarchies of access to resources that produce inequities” (p. 230). For formerly incarcerated people in particular, a recognition of the numerous structural forces that have fueled mass incarceration must be a policy priority.

Table 2. Women’s Priority Tasks Post-release versus the State’s View of What Their Priorities Should Be

	Women’s Priority Task	State’s View of What Women’s Priority Should Be
Gabrielle	Get financial assistance	Establish residency
Alice	Eat, get a job	Get a job
Jessie	Reunite with son	Get a job
Carina	Get assistance for herself and her unborn child	Assist her unborn child

A consistent theme throughout my findings is that interactions with the welfare system frequently make women’s lives more difficult through exclusionary policies. The welfare system is not equipped to facilitate the prisoner reentry process in a holistic way; the aim in policy reform should be to ensure that accessing welfare assistance does not further impede people in rebuilding their lives post-incarceration. Table 2 provides a clue about how to do this. Gabrielle’s priority when she first got out was to obtain financial assistance so that she could keep her housing; the state’s priority was for her

to wait two weeks so that she could claim “residency” in the county. Jessie’s goal was to reunite with her son, and thus her priority was all the work associated with achieving that goal: substance abuse counseling, parenting classes, and complying with the conditions of her probation. The state, however, considered her priority task to be looking for a job. By making women’s priorities central, a more inclusive welfare system should allow for women to set and achieve their priorities while—not instead of—receiving assistance. In Jessie’s case, for example, she could be allowed to count the work she was doing to regain custody of her son toward the required hours of work for her food stamps and cash aid.

Alice’s priorities when she got out were to be able to eat and to get a job. Alienating policies that prevent individuals with criminal records from receiving food stamps must be repealed. Alice’s experience, which was common among the women I interviewed, reflects the legacy of punitive drug policies and discourses around the unworthiness of drug addicts for government assistance. Such discourses have had harsh effects on women. As Bush-Baskette (2010) has argued, the American “war on drugs”—the use of aggressive policing tactics coupled with long and mandatory prison sentences—has, in large part, been a war on women: between 1986 and 1991 alone, the number of women incarcerated in state prisons for drug crimes increased 433 percent, while men’s incarceration for drugs increased 283 percent during that period (p. 40). As of 2011, a quarter of women in state prison and 58 percent of women in federal prison were incarcerated for a drug conviction (Carson & Golinelli, 2013). Feminist scholars have argued that such trends are symptomatic of a prison regime that systematically exploits and marginalizes people of color and women in particular (Gilmore, 2007; Richie, 1996; Sudbury, 2002).

The larger point, however, is that Alice’s goal of getting a job matches what the state’s priority is for her, and yet she still has substantial difficulty in achieving it. A restructuring of welfare policies should account for the difficulties of finding employment when one has a criminal record. Such difficulties are not insurmountable, as the growing number of successful employment programs for formerly incarcerated people has shown (Council of State Governments, 2014). Welfare-to-work programs should not only train job searchers how to handle

their criminal histories on applications and in interviews, but also work to connect formerly incarcerated people with employers who are willing to hire them.

This institutional ethnographic analysis has allowed a vision of a real restructuring of welfare that places women's needs at the center and which recognizes the extra challenges associated with having a criminal record. Such reforms would enable women to carry out the already difficult work of rebuilding their lives post-incarceration.

Acknowledgements: The author wishes to thank Paul Luken, Suzanne Vaughan, and the anonymous reviewers for their invaluable feedback which strengthened this manuscript. Thank you also to Nicole Kaufman, Valli Rajah, and Chez Rumpf, whose comments on an earlier draft greatly improved the final product. I am grateful for numerous colleagues in the Institutional Ethnography division of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, who have provided encouraging and constructive thoughts about this project throughout its development. Most importantly, thank you to the women who allowed me to observe and speak to them about their lives.

The author received critical support for this research from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York's Doctoral Student Research Grant program, Competition #8.

References

- Abramovitz, M. (1996). *Regulating the lives of women: Social welfare policy from colonial times to the present* (2nd ed.). Boston, MA: South End Press.
- Beckett, K., & Western, B. (2001). Governing social marginality: Welfare, incarceration, and the transformation of state policy. *Punishment & Society*, 3(1), 43-59.
- Bisaillon, L. (2012). An analytic glossary to social inquiry using institutional and political activist ethnography. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 11(5), 607-627.
- Brown, D. (2006). Working the system: Re-thinking the institutionally organized role of mothers and the reduction of "risk" in child protection work. *Social Problems*, 53(3), 352-370.
- Brown, M., & Bloom, B. (2009). Reentry and renegotiating motherhood: Maternal identity and success on parole. *Crime & Delinquency*, 55(2), 313-336.
- Bush-Baskette, S. (2010). *Misguided justice: The war on drugs and the incarceration of black women*. Bloomington, IN: iUniverse.

- Butler, S., Corbett, J., Bond, C., & Hastedt, C. (2008). Long-term TANF participants and barriers to employment: A qualitative study in Maine. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, 35(3), 49-69.
- California Department of Social Services. (2011). *CalWORKs 48-month time limit*. Retrieved from <http://www.cdss.ca.gov/calworks/>
- Carson, E., & Golinelli, D. (2013). *Prisoners in 2012* (NCJ 243920). Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- Council of State Governments. (2014). *What works in reentry clearinghouse*. Retrieved from <http://whatworks.csgjusticecenter.org/>
- DeVault, M. (1992). *Feeding the family*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Dickman, M. (2009). Should crime pay? A critical assessment of the Mandatory Victims Restitution Act of 1996. *California Law Review*, 97(6), 1687-1718.
- Edin, K., & Lein, L. (1997). *Making ends meet: How single mothers survive welfare and low-wage work*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Fraser, N. (1987). Women, welfare, and the politics of need interpretation. *Hypatia*, 2(1), 103-121.
- Frost, N., Greene, J., & Pranis, K. (2006). *Hard hit: The growth in the imprisonment of women, 1977-2004*. New York, NY: Institute on Women and Criminal Justice, Women's Prison Association.
- Gilmore, R. (2007). *Golden gulag: Prisons, surplus, and opposition in globalizing California*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Griffith, A. (1998). Insider/outsider: Epistemological privilege and mothering work. *Human Studies*, 21(4), 361-376.
- Harris, D., & Parisi, D. (2008). Welfare and family economic security: Toward a place-based poverty knowledge. *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*, 35(3), 97-113.
- Katz, M. (2001). *The price of citizenship: Redefining the American welfare state*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Maruna, S. (2011). Reentry as a rite of passage. *Punishment & Society*, 13(1), 3-28.
- Mauer, M. (2002). Mass imprisonment and the disappearing voters. In M. Mauer, & M. Chesney-Lind (Eds.), *Invisible punishment: The collateral consequences of mass imprisonment* (pp. 50-58). New York, NY: The New Press.
- Mauer, M. (2013). *The changing racial dynamics of women's incarceration*. Washington, DC: The Sentencing Project.
- Mauer, M. & McCalmont, V. (2013). *A lifetime of punishment: The impact of the felony drug ban on welfare benefits*. Washington, DC: The Sentencing Project.
- McCarty, M., Aussenberg, R., Falk, G., & Carpenter, D. (2013). *Drug testing and crime-related restrictions in TANF, SNAP, and Housing Assistance* (R42394). Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service.
- McMahon, M. (1995). *Engendering motherhood: Identity and self-transformation in women's lives*. New York: Guilford.

- Miller, R. (2013). Race, hyper-incarceration, and US poverty policy in historic perspective. *Sociology Compass*, 7(7), 573-589.
- Mykhalovskiy, E., & McCoy, L. (2002). Troubling ruling discourses of health: Using institutional ethnography in community-based research. *Critical Public Health*, 12(1), 17-37.
- Pager, D. (2003). The mark of a criminal record. *American Journal of Sociology*, 108(5), 937-975.
- Pager, D. (2007). *Marked: Race, crime, and finding work in an era of mass incarceration*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago.
- Pew Center on the States. (2011). *State of recidivism: The revolving door of America's prisons*. Washington, DC: Pew Charitable Trusts.
- Piven, F., & Cloward, R. (1993). *Regulating the poor: The functions of public welfare* (2nd ed.). New York: Vintage Books.
- Richie, B. (1996). *Compelled to crime: The gender entrapment of battered Black women*. New York: Routledge.
- Richie, B. (2012). *Arrested justice: Black women, violence, and America's prison nation*. New York: New York University.
- Ridzi, F. (2009). *Selling welfare reform: Work-first and the new common sense of employment*. New York: New York University.
- Rubenstein, G., & Mukamal, D. (2002). Welfare and housing-denial of benefits to drug offenders. In M. Mauer & M. Chesney-Lind, (Eds.), *Invisible punishment: The collateral consequences of mass imprisonment* (pp. 37-49). New York, NY: The New Press.
- Schott, L. & Cho, C. (2011). *General assistance programs: Safety net weakening despite increased need*. Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.
- Schott, L., & Pavletti, L. (2011). *Many states cutting TANF benefits harshly despite high unemployment and unprecedented need*. Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.
- Shannon, S. (2013). *Does the right hand know what the left hand is doing? General Assistance welfare, crime, and punishment in the United States* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest (3596360).
- Smith, D. (1975). The statistics on mental illness: What they will not tell us about women and why. In D. Smith & S. David (Eds.), *Women look at psychiatry* (pp. 12-52). Vancouver: Press Gang.
- Smith, D. (1983). No one commits suicide: Textual analysis of ideological practices. *Human Studies*, 6(1), 309-359.
- Smith, D. (1987). *The everyday world as problematic: A feminist sociology*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto.
- Smith, D. (1990). *Texts, facts, and femininity: Exploring the relations of ruling*. New York: Routledge Press.
- Smith, D. (1993). The Standard North American Family: SNAF as an ideological code. *Journal of Family Issues*, 14(1), 50-65.
- Smith, D. (2009). Categories are not enough. *Gender & Society*, 23(1), 76-80.
- Snell, T. (with Morton, D.). (1994). *Women in prison: Survey of state prison inmates, 1991* [Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report NCJ-145321]. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice.

- Solomon, B. (2003). A "know it all" with a "pet peeve" meets "underdogs" who "let her have it": Producing low-waged women workers in a welfare-to-work training program. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 32(6), 693-727.
- Soss, J., Fording, R., & Schram, S. (2011). *Disciplining the poor: Neoliberal paternalism and the persistent power of race*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago.
- Sudbury, J. (2002). Celling black bodies: Black women in the global prison industrial complex. *Feminist Review*, 70, 57-74.
- Taylor, T. (2013). Paperwork first, not work first: How caseworkers use paperwork to feel effective. *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*, 40(1), 9-27.
- Travis, J. (2002). Invisible punishment: An instrument of social exclusion. In M. Mauer & M. Chesney-Lind (Eds.), *Invisible punishment: The collateral consequences of mass imprisonment* (pp. 15-36). New York, NY: The New Press.
- United States Department of Agriculture. (2014). *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP): Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDs)*. Retrieved from <http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/able-bodied-adults-without-dependents-abawds>
- Wacquant, L. (2010). Prisoner reentry as myth and ceremony. *Dialectical Anthropology*, 34, 605-620.
- Weaver, V., & Lerman, A. (2010). Political consequences of the carceral state. *American Political Science Review*, 104(4), 817-833.
- Weigt, J. (2006). Compromises to carework: The social organization of mothers' experiences in the low-wage labor market after welfare reform. *Social Problems*, 53(3), 332-351.
- Welsh, M., & Rajah, V. (2014). Rendering invisible punishments visible: Using institutional ethnography in feminist criminology. *Feminist Criminology*, 9(4), 323-343.

