

# Chapter 21

## Mothering Behind Bars: Psychological Implications and Alternative-to-Incarceration Programs

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### ABSTRACT

*The aim of this narrative literature review chapter was twofold: (a) summarize the information available in scholarly journals about the demographics of incarcerated mothers, the characteristics of incarcerated mothers, the mother-child contact during incarceration, and alternative-to-incarceration programs; and (b) identify gaps in the literature and propose recommendations for future research. An electronic search was initiated using PsycINFO, EBSCO, and Google Scholar. A total of 39 articles were included in this chapter. Results reveal that incarcerated mothers have unique demographic characteristics and suffer from an array of psychiatric disorders. The symptomology of these psychiatric disorders is further exacerbated by sporadic mother-child contact. Several alternative-to-incarceration programs have been developed to promote mother-child contact and bring about positive mental health outcomes for them. Recommendations for future research have been proposed so as to provide a more in-depth understanding of this vulnerable population.*

### INTRODUCTION

In comparison to other developed nations, the United States (U.S.) has the highest rates of incarceration (Conklin et al., 2000; Kjellstrand et al., 2012; Lewis, 2005; Roxburgh & Fitch, 2014). With a rate of 358 per 100,000 individuals, the U.S. detained 1,215,800 persons in state and federal prisons in 2020 (U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2021). To operate these overcrowded state and federal correctional facilities, the U.S. spends approximately \$81.5 billion annually (Jensen, 2021).

The women population in state and federal prisons is surging at a fast rate (Hairston, 1991; Scott et al., 2014). The number of incarcerated women in state and federal prisons rose from 12,331 in 1980 to 83,054 in 2020 (U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2021). This marked surge in women's incarceration

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rates is due to the correctional policy change, which was instigated in the 1980s as a response to the War on Drugs. To prevent drug-related crimes, the new correctional policy highly emphasized severe punishments, including lengthy sentences (Hanlon et al., 2007).

In fact, more than half of the women in state and federal prisons are mothers (Battle et al., 2003). Incarcerated mothers have unique demographic characteristics; they are young and racially diverse, have low educational attainment, were unemployed, are mostly single and have a familial history of incarceration, have disabilities, and assign surrogate parenting roles to their grandparents or extended family members (U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2008). Also, incarcerated mothers suffer from a wide range of psychiatric disorders (Stanton & Rose, 2020), which have been found to correlate with trauma exposure and sexually-transmitted diseases (Dargis & Mitchell-Somoza, 2021), and criminality (Stanton & Rose, 2020).

During imprisonment, mother-child contact often diminishes (Dargis & Mitchell-Somoza, 2021). This is due to a wide range of factors, including correctional facilities' policies and practices (Dargis & Mitchell-Somoza, 2021; Hairston, 1991), prisons' distant location from residential areas (U.S. Bureau of Justice, 2000), and incarcerated mothers' relationship with their children's current caregivers (Dargis & Mitchell-Somoza, 2021). Limited mother-child contact has been documented to precipitate severe mental health outcomes for mothers (Houck & Loper, 2002) and their children (Hanlon et al., 2007).

Alternative-to-incarceration programs, such as ReMerge and WIND, have been developed with the aim of augmenting mother-child contact, and promoting positive mental health outcomes for incarcerated mothers and their children (McCoy & Russo, 2018). Thus, the aim of this narrative literature review was twofold: (a) summarize the information available in scholarly journals about the demographics of incarcerated mothers, the characteristics of incarcerated mothers, the mother-child contact during incarceration, and alternative-to-incarceration programs; and (b) identify gaps in the literature and propose recommendations for future research.

## **METHODS**

As a narrative literature review aims at identifying gaps in the knowledge base and offering recommendations for future research (Kuziemsky & Yin, 2017), it was chosen as the most suitable approach to guide this paper. A narrative literature review "attempts to summarize and synthesize what has been written on a topic, but does not seek generalization from what is reviewed" (p. 161). Green et al.'s (2006) framework for launching narrative literature reviews guided this paper. It has three stages: (a) specify research question(s), (b) select relevant articles, and (c) identify inclusion and exclusion criteria.

### **Specify Research Question(s)**

The following research questions guided this narrative literature review paper:

- (a) What are the demographics of incarcerated mothers in the U.S.?
- (b) What are the prevalent psychiatric disorders among incarcerated mothers in the U.S.?
- (c) How is mother-child contact affected by maternal incarceration?
- (d) What are examples of alternative-to-incarceration programs for mothers in the U.S.?

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