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Building Grounds for Release: Women's Perceptions of a Community Corrections Program

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ABSTRACT

Few studies have examined the role halfway houses play in helping women navigate the transition from prison to community. To add to this research, my article explores the perceptions and experiences of women residing at a New Jersey female halfway house upon their release from prison. In-depth qualitative interviews with 33 women that I conducted were analyzed to understand the prison to halfway house transition. The study aims to answer the following questions: How does the halfway house help and/or hinder the reentry process? How do women perceive the halfway house during this transitional phase? The results of my research provides support for the argument that more residential opportunities should be provided for returning prisoners as they begin the reentry process.

Introduction

Women constitute the fastest growing demographic group incarcerated in prisons in the United States. Less than 20 years ago, approximately 61,146 women were incarcerated in state prisons (Gillard & Beck, 1996) compared with 108,866 in 2012 (Carson & Golinelli, 2013). As a result of this increase, there is a growing body of research focused on women prisoners and the problems they experience before, during, and after incarceration. Studies consistently find that women enter the criminal justice system with more severe needs than male prisoners. For example, women self-report more severe histories of substance abuse (Mumola & Karberg, 2006), medical and mental health problems (James & Glaze, 2006; Maruschak, 2008), and physical and sexual abuse (Belknap, 2007). Women also face unique circumstances due to the fact that they are more likely to be the primary caregiver of young children than male prisoners (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Unfortunately, the issues women enter prison with are often left unaddressed while incarcerated (Holtfreter & Morash, 2003). Depending on whether these needs are addressed while they are incarcerated, women may leave prison with unmet needs and face further challenges as they attempt to reintegrate back into the community (Bergseth, Jens, Bergeron-Vigessa, & McDonald, 2011). Securing housing, finding work, accessing treatment programs, and reconnecting with children are just a few of the challenges awaiting women upon their release from prison.

Few studies have examined the role halfway houses play in helping women navigate the transition from prison to community. To add to the research, my study explores women's perceptions and experiences while residing at a female halfway house upon their release from prison. The study aims to answer the following questions: How does the halfway house help and/or hinder the reentry process? How do women perceive the halfway house experience during this transitional phase? I conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with 33 women and analyzed their responses to understand the prison to halfway house transition. The following section provides context on the challenges

women experience when reentering the community. Next, the literature on the benefit of using community correction facilities to address women's needs will be presented. The results of this study further support the argument that there is a definite need to provide more residential opportunities for returning prisoners as they begin the reentry process.

Women's reentry experience

As evident from the large body of research on reentry barriers, women face multiple challenges when trying to address their needs immediately after their release. Securing housing is often the most immediate need. Housing issues are often the result of limited availability of safe and affordable housing, legal issues (i.e., the restrictions of living with other parolees and in certain public housing buildings), and family conflict (Roman & Travis, 2004). Most returning prisoners live with family or friends upon their release (LaVigne & Kachnowski, 2003; Nelson, Perry, & Allen, 1999); however, for those with family conflicts, this is not a viable option (Roman & Travis, 2004). For women, securing housing where they will not be faced with victimization and substance use is not always possible, causing many women to end up homeless or in conditions that do not support a drug-free lifestyle (Bloom & Covington, 2000). To be successful, women need safe and affordable housing that supports sober living and provides child-friendly accommodations (Berman, 2005).

When searching for work, returning prisoners experience multiple barriers because of their low educational attainment, unemployment history, or lack of work experience (Western, 2007). Other challenges associated with securing employment include health issues, mental health problems, and their possible history of substance abuse (Visher, Debus, & Yahner, 2008). The stigma associated with having a criminal record also impacts employment prospects (Sampson & Laub, 1993; Western, 2007). This stigma is known to decrease an employer's willingness to hire returning prisoners, resulting in difficulties the women face when searching for jobs (Pager, 2007). Though some research indicates that learning about job opportunities through social networks is often weakened as a result of incarceration (Western, 2007), many returning prisoners often secure job opportunities through friends, family, and former employers (Nelson et al., 1999; Solomon, Roman, & Waul, 2001). Women face additional work challenges because they are often the primary caregiver for young children and access to affordable childcare is not always available (Berman, 2005; Flowers, 2010). Furthermore, the social and economic marginalization women have historically faced adds to the barriers they face as they attempt to find a salaried job after spending time in prison (Scroggins & Malley, 2010).

Addressing substance abuse and other health needs is another important area for many returning prisoners. Richie (2001) noted that women in transition lack treatment options for substance abuse, physical and mental health problems, and unresolved trauma issues. The prevalence of co-occurring disorders among women prisoners (Bloom, Owen, & Covington, 2003; Holtfreter & Morash, 2003) highlights the importance of addressing substance abuse, mental health, and victimization in the same

treatment setting. Prendergast, Wellisch, and Falkin (1995) reported that while many community-based substance abuse programs provide referrals for women to address other needs (i.e., mental health and victimization), it is uncommon for programs to address these women-specific needs in one site. Prendergast et al. also identified the challenge of finding child care and adequate transportation to attend substance abuse treatment programs. Furthermore, public transportation to services may not always be located in safe areas (Berman, 2005) which may prevent women from using transportation options and addressing certain needs (O'Brien & Young, 2006). Another barrier to accessing services involves the social stigma women experience when returning home from prison. Women may perceive the stigma and rejection from society greater than men due to the double violation of legal and gender social norms (Belknap, 2007). Unfortunately this stigma may prevent them from accessing community resources (Travis, 2005).

Current research further illustrates the challenges women have accessing reentry services. Scroggins and Malley's (2010) research on female community reentry programs showed a disconnect between program availability and meeting women's needs. These authors found that the most common unmet needs included access to childcare, parenting classes, healthcare, housing, transportation, and education. Reasons for not meeting women's needs included limited availability of programs, lack of program capacity, and lengthy distance to programs. According to Scoggins and Malley, little research exists on whether reentry programs for women help them access services to achieve success in the community.

As indicated in the reentry literature on housing and employment, family and community support are crucial elements in addressing all reentry needs. In addition to providing housing and job leads, family and friends often end up financially supporting returning family members (Mallik-Kane & Visher, 2008). For women, reestablishing relationships with family and children is critical to successful reentry (Arditti & Few, 2006). When incarcerated, women are often held in facilities far from their home communities, making it challenging for families to visit (Pollock, 2003). This separation from children is known to impact the psychological development of women offenders (Hollin & Palmer, 2006), making reunification a central focus for many women upon release.

The role of community correction facilities

The literature on the needs women must address when returning to civilian life indicates the importance of providing transitional and long-term services that help women navigate complex social service systems (Covington, 2003; Richie, 2001). To address the multiple needs of women, many researchers have suggested providing women with comprehensive community-based services that involve linkages among multiple systems (Covington, 2003; O'Brien & Lee, 2006; Richie, 2001). One approach to help women make a successful transition to free society is the use of community correction facilities—traditionally known as halfway houses.¹

Though not a new intervention, community correction facilities provide returning prisoners an opportunity to secure employment, save money, and have a place to “get back on their feet” (Latessa, 2004, p. 138). Community correction facilities were originally developed due to the ineffectiveness of traditional prison programs, to reduce overcrowding, and as a cost-effective strategy to keep prisoners in the community (Donnelly & Forschner, 1987; Latessa & Allen, 1982). Described by Latessa and Travis (1991):

Halfway houses provide the security of a structured controlled residence, similar to incarceration, combined with the freedom of residents to seek and engage in employment and other activities in the free community. (p. 54)

This intermediate phase of incarceration is viewed as less intrusive, allows the returning prisoner to learn how to cope with the community environment, provides graduated levels of supervision, and addresses specific needs (Zaplin, 1998). Community facilities are also better positioned to use neighborhood resources such as local employment services, housing programs, drug treatment, and other social services. Most community programs focus on rehabilitation and some offer services designed to address the unique challenges returning prisoners face in regard to employment, education, and treatment. Across the country, programs especially for women have been designed to address gender-specific issues such as parenting, victimization, and co-occurring disorders (Kelley, 2003; Mackey & Fretz, 2007; Prendergast, Hall, & Wellisch, 2002). Researchers who have evaluated these programs reported that women who transitioned through community correction facilities have lower recidivism rates than those who have not (Mackey & Fretz, 2007; O'Brien, 2002).

Methodology

The findings discussed in this paper were extracted from interview transcripts of women residing at a halfway house in New Jersey. The larger study from which these findings came was designed to capture women's perceptions and experiences with prison and halfway house programming, their support systems, childhood experiences, and release plans. My article, however, focuses on women's perceptions and experiences transitioning through a halfway house. The study aims to answer the following questions: How does the halfway house help and/or hinder the reentry process, and how do women perceive the halfway house during this transitional phase?

Sample and data collection methods

Permission to conduct research at the halfway house site was approved by the director of the facility and the Institutional Review Board at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. All women residing at the halfway house between June 2007 and November 2007 were eligible to participate in this study. I interviewed any resident who was present at the halfway house during the hours I was onsite, which included morning, afternoon, or evening. Case workers used a daily roster to determine which

residents were onsite. Once several residents were identified, the case worker or other halfway house staff called each resident individually and gave her directions to the location of the interview space. During the day, interviews often took place in a private classroom space where group treatment was held. During the evening, the interviews took place in the case manager's office after she left for the day. Both spaces had a door that was closed during the time of the interview. When a resident entered the interview space, I introduced the study and consent process, informed participants about the voluntary nature of the interview, and assured her that confidentiality would be protected. After women agreed to participate, their permission to audio-record the interview was requested. Over time, many of the residents became familiar with me and had heard about the study prior to entering the interview space. Several women offered, without being asked, to participate in the interview.

On the day of the first interview, 43 women were residing in the halfway house. Over a six month period, 35 women were selected to be interviewed; however, only 33 agreed to participate.² Four of the 33 women refused to have the interview recorded. The in-depth qualitative interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours. Each interview was structured around a series of broad questions on a woman's pathway to prison, her experience at the New Jersey Department of Corrections (NJDOC), the transition to the halfway house, and daily life at the house. Reentry needs (e.g., job search, housing, family reunification, treatment for substance abuse and mental health, etc.), were addressed as well as family relationships and expectations for reentry to the community. I transcribed all recorded interviews and took detailed notes during the four interviews with participants who refused to be recorded.

Additionally, demographic, criminal history, and family history data on the sample population were collected from resident case files. Data from case files included Pre-Sentence Investigation Reports, the NJDOC Comprehensive Assessment Profile, a Correctional Facility Assessment, and the Level of Service Inventory-Revised (LSI-R) conducted by halfway house staff. These documents were used to develop a profile for each participant.

Data analysis

The interviews covered a wide range of topics; therefore I identified subsections of the transcripts in which respondents specifically spoke about the halfway house personnel's assistance in the reentry process and daily life at the house; they also addressed various reentry needs while at the house. Participants were categorized into three broad categories: Perceived house as helpful in the reentry process, perceived house as barrier to reentry, or had mixed/neutral views. A process of initial coding then took place as a method of studying fragments of interview transcripts (Charmaz, 2006). As segments of transcripts were labeled, I analyzed the meaning of the participants' words by writing analytical memos (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Codes developed during initial coding were applied during the second analytical phase of focused coding. During this phase, I used the qualitative software

program *Atlas.ti* to aid in making connections between interviews and to search for additional themes related to women's perceptions of the halfway house experience. This phase allowed me to further identify aspects of the data that may have been overlooked during initial coding and also allowed for greater comparison between participants (Charmaz, 2006). As much as possible, the analysis focused on the participants' perceptions of the halfway house, including the structure of the program and their ability to address reentry needs. Lastly, to develop a participant profile, I reviewed participant case files and analyzed the data using descriptive statistics related to key demographic, criminal history, and family variables.

Study sample

All participants were previously incarcerated in New Jersey's Edna Mahan Correctional Facility (NJDOC). Twenty-five women entered NJDOC as new admissions and were released to the halfway house to serve the remainder of their sentence, or until they reached their parole eligibility date. Eight women initially entered NJDOC as parole violators and were referred to the halfway house by the New Jersey State Parole Board (NJSPB). When the interviews took place, the length of time the sample participants had lived at the halfway house varied; 12 of the women interviewed had been at the halfway house for less than 30 days; 11 had been there for more than 30 days, and 10 were within two weeks of release from the program. The average length of time participants remained in the program was 202 days (with a range of 51-475 days). The length of time in the program varied and often depended on how much time remained on their sentence until parole eligible.

Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 58 years old, with an average age of 39. Women were primarily African American (52%), followed by 27% White, and 21% Hispanic. The racial/ethnic breakdown of the sample was similar to the NJDOC female prison population (51% African American, 35% White, and 13% Hispanic) (NJDOC, 2009). More than half of the women were unmarried (61%), and the majority had at least one child under the age of 18 (64%). Sixty-one percent of participants had a high school diploma, or GED and 55% were frequently unemployed.

The majority of the sample had an extensive criminal history with 58% having three or more criminal convictions. The most frequent crimes women were convicted of were non-violent (42% drug related; 27% theft; 6% other) with a lesser percentage serving time for violent offenses (24%). In comparison, the 2009 New Jersey female prison population had less frequent drug related charges (27%) and a higher percentage of violent crimes (48%) than the study sample (NJDOC, 2009).³

According to LSI-R scores, a history of substance use was common in most of the sample (64%), however only 49% had a current substance abuse problem. An indication of a mental health problem was less frequently identified. According to LSI-R data, only 24% of the sample received previous mental health treatment. Typical mental health problems included depression, post traumatic stress

disorder, and bipolar disorder. Although the sample had a lower percentage of prior mental health treatment, the LSI-R indicated that 49% of women had moderate interference caused by emotional/personal problems. Problems assessed included anger issues, impulsivity, depression, domestic violence, and PTSD. In addition, participant case files indicated that 46% had experienced domestic violence in an intimate relationship and 30% were sexually abused in their childhood.

Case files revealed 39% of participants had health related problems, including diabetes, high blood pressure, and asthma, or more serious health problems such as HIV, cancer, and Hepatitis C. Additionally, family risk factors and criminal associations were common among most participants. Sixty-seven percent of the sample had a close family member with a criminal history and 76% had an immediate family member with a substance abuse problem. In addition, 52% of participants had an indication of instability⁴ in the home growing up. Most participants also reported having criminal associations with acquaintances (73%) and friends (55%).

Program context

In New Jersey, the NJDOC contracts with non-profit agencies to provide inmates with programming in the community, known as Residential Community Release Programs (RCRP). In 2003, the NJDOC contracted with 23 RCRPs where 2,803 beds were available (Travis, Keegan, & Cadora, 2003). According to the NJDOC website, in 2012 there were 20 RCRPs with 2,657 beds available throughout the state. These programs offer a range of services, including employment assistance, education, substance abuse treatment, counseling, and housing assistance.

My article is based on research conducted at a female RCRP (referred to as “the halfway house” hereafter). The 47-bed halfway house is located in a high crime neighborhood in New Jersey. The facility looks like a residential setting with no obvious security or surveillance on the exterior of the house. Women are referred to the halfway house from either the NJDOC or the New Jersey State Parole Board (NJSPB). Women referred from the NJDOC must be within 18 months of their parole eligibility date. Women referred from the NJSPB enter the halfway house after violating parole conditions. A small staff of 15 works at the halfway house, including 3 staff in high administrative positions, 2 case managers, 1 employment specialist, 1 administrative assistant, and several staff that rotate shifts at the front desk.

The halfway house follows a gradual phase system that provides residents with privileges as they achieve certain goals and maintain good standing in the program. The core program focus is on employment and education. Residents must obtain and maintain work or attend school while in the program. Other program objectives include attending job readiness classes, participating in mandatory onsite treatment groups, and following other goals outlined on individualized treatment plans. To help residents achieve their individual treatment goals, staff requires eligible residents to

participate in an onsite substance abuse and gender-responsive treatment groups. Residents also receive individual life skills coaching, employment assistance, and case management services. Women in need of additional services such as mental health, domestic violence counseling, and parenting are referred to outside programs in the local area.

Research findings

Prisoners returning straight from prison to the community are forced to return to high-risk situations, find immediate housing, reunite with family, and obtain employment (Visser & Travis, 2003). The participants in my study did not have to worry about finding immediate housing or return to high-risk living situations because they were provided with housing as they dealt with a variety of emotional events including anxiety about relapsing, employment rejection, family adjustment, and other personal and emotional issues. As they addressed their personal needs and began the preparation for release, participants were still under the supervision of a correctional agency and had to navigate through a system that provided both opportunity and restraint in one setting. The following themes highlight the different perceptions women had of the halfway house program.

Building ground for release

Even though residents were still under correctional supervision and movement was limited, the majority of participants perceived the halfway house as less restrictive than prison. Residents discussed having the ability to wear their own clothing, wear cosmetics, walk freely around the house, sleep in unlocked rooms, order take-out food, wash their own laundry, go shopping, use the pay phone, and participate in recreational activities off-site with staff. Participants described these as freedoms not afforded to them while in custody. The deprivation of goods and services so commonly talked about among prisoners in Sykes' research (1958) was immediately identified by the women in my research as the first indicator that the halfway house was different from prison. They also had opportunities to search for employment and housing while simultaneously reconnecting with family and addressing personal needs. Participants were asked if they would rather finish their time in prison or at the halfway house. Most women agreed that the halfway house was a more desired place to prepare for release.

According to Nicky,

No, I would rather finish my time here 'cause I feel like I have more freedom for me and a lot of opportunities and I can go out there and do something for me today as far as getting a job, getting my own apartment, things like that. I want to go back to school so I prefer to be here. This is my opportunity that I need to take advantage of.

Even with these new found freedoms, the majority of residents discussed feeling regulated by the program rules that included making accountability calls when out in the community, having their

money monitored, and asking for permission to visit family and access services. The regulations related to job searches, especially the pressure to find work within 30 days, and the multiple barriers associated with finding work in general left many participants discouraged with the job search experience. As participants waited for employers to call them, they expressed anxiety over never obtaining a job. Rachel, one of the interviewees, expressed frustration and discouragement that she could not secure a job after two weeks of searching. At 31, she was a first-time offender who had served five years for reckless manslaughter. While incarcerated, she obtained her GED. She had no history of substance abuse but had experienced childhood neglect and sexual abuse. After spending 35 days at the halfway house, she recognized that, although difficult, the requirements of the program would help her deal with other responsibilities once released.

Yes, I've been doing it for two weeks. It's—it's frustrating, aggravating. It can get discouraging, you know, but I just tell myself that I've been through worse, you know? I didn't come all this—I've been thinking about going back to Clinton [prison] and take the easy way out, but I just say to myself that I didn't come all this way just to go backwards, you know? And I feel like, you know, if I don't make it here while in the halfway house it's like how will I make it on the street because on the streets, there's bigger issues that I'm going to have to deal with, you know? There's more than just going out looking for a job. There's getting an apartment, there's reporting to my parole officer and, you know, being a mother to my daughter and all of that type of stuff I have to deal with it. So it's like if I try to cop out now and then wait until I go home and think everything is going to be all right then, you know, I'm mistaken in that area. So this is—to me this is like building ground for when I go home.

For first-time offenders and those who never worked prior to entering the halfway house, the stigma associated with having a criminal record was “humiliating” when trying to secure employment. Many participants discussed the rejection they experienced while out on the search and the feeling of hopelessness when not hearing back from employers. One participant who was at the halfway house for eight months at the time of the interview described her struggle dealing with the stigma associated with her criminal record. Gail (age 39) was also a first time offender charged with reckless manslaughter. Going through the employment process while at the halfway house prepared her for the challenges associated with job searching, something she felt that she would have struggled with if she was released straight to the community.

My biggest thing was I thought I would have a hard time with feeling like people are staring at me—knowing where I came from and what I did. The stigma bothered me. The hardest thing was getting a job and the rejection. I'm glad that I am here doing this—I think I would have gone through a depression if I was home doing this. The rejection was hard and I don't think I would have been prepared for it if I went straight home.

Gail was one of the few women at the halfway house with a college degree. She was also enrolled in law school and had a lengthy employment history with a financial institution. Gail and Rachel were both first-time offenders with similar charges, and although they had very different upbringings and educational backgrounds, the stigma and anxiety of the job search each experienced was similar. Gail ended up finding work at a fast-food restaurant, while Rachel enrolled in school at a community college. Many of the women discussed the hardships of job searching they encountered, which were not alleviated by higher levels of education. While they described the process as humiliating and burdensome, they accepted their situation and were willing to follow the required rules to successfully make it through the halfway house. It was common for women to take any job to just fulfill the program requirements. For some, any job was a positive outcome when their employment history was weak. For others, like Gail, accepting a low-skilled job was considered a career setback. Unfortunately, the 30 day period to find work limits the opportunity for qualified residents to obtain more advanced work. How this impacts their ability to support themselves and their families, once released, was not explored in this study, but may have important implications for their ability to sustain their financial independence and community success.

In terms of program rules, many perceived the rules and structure as a positive factor. According to Beth,

They give you a little more freedom here ... sometimes the freedom is not good for some of the girls because maybe you are not ready for it. It is a place that helps you come here and you can live and get your life together if that is what you want to do. You can go out the same way you came in, because a lot of these girls are going out the same way they came in. A lot of them don't want anything different, they want to stay the way they are and that is cool—that is them. They give you all the support you need to do better in life and they try to show you a better way. The rules are kind of strict here, but I don't have a problem with them because I need rules in my life. We all do really, because that is why we are here—because we messed up.

Beth was a 48 year old resident with a lengthy criminal history (18 convictions) and substance abuse problem; she had spent eight months at the halfway house and was within two days of release at the time of the interview. Beth recognized the halfway house rules and requirements as a necessary component of her success. Several participants also pointed out that some residents did not want to follow the rules, and as Beth stated, "A lot of them don't want anything different." This was recognized by several participants. They shared the perception that as long as residents are ready to change, following program regulations is not difficult. To many of these women the rules were a necessary part of the reentry process.

Protective haven

The halfway house was often viewed as a safe and supportive place to reenter. Women described halfway house workers as more supportive than prison staff. They “care about me”, “treat me like a human being”, and help with personal problems. Participants also spoke often about the surrounding community and viewed the halfway house as a space they could rely on for physical safety. Some women were returning to the same neighborhood as the house and felt the gradual transition allowed them to address some of the stressors in the community (e.g., drug activity and drug associates). Researchers have reported that some women prisoners described correctional facilities as safe havens that protected them from victimization experienced at home or on the streets (Bradley & Davino, 2002; Henriquez & Jones-Brown, 2000). Marie, aged 44, described the halfway house as a protective haven that provided her with the opportunity to slowly readjust to the neighborhood. In this case, the halfway house provided her temporary shelter and support as she addressed her substance abuse.

Because I know this is where I'm going to be. It doesn't matter where you send me. This is where I'm going to be whether I'm clean and sober or high and drunk. This is where I'm going to be. I stand a better chance of making a foundation when I'm clean and sober, of staying clean and sober—you know what I mean?—because my foundation is already made in here. You know, I don't have to come here and seek it out. You know, I've—I've got, you know, a protective little haven right now, and if things don't work out I have some place I can run back to and talk, its right here.

Marie's extensive substance abuse and criminal history background (27 convictions for drug and prostitution offenses) prevented her from leading a law abiding lifestyle. She explained that after several other incarcerations, she was sent to halfway houses outside of her home community. The opportunity to finally re-enter her home community from a local halfway house was perceived as a positive factor.

For some women, the halfway house was also perceived as a place of respite. This feeling was shared by women who were not originally from the surrounding area, and in some cases, had never been exposed to city life. Not only did residing in an unfamiliar place make out-of-town participants feel uneasy, but there was the fact that this unfamiliarity was coupled with a neighborhood characterized as disorderly and high-crime. When asking residents about navigating the community when out on a job search, Nora (age 31) expressed fears of traveling in an unfamiliar place. Nora, a first-time offender with no history of substance abuse, grew up in a middle class community. To Nora, like many others, the halfway house was a safe escape from the neighborhood conditions.

Ms. S. has to map out where I am going. Because otherwise I would get lost, and that is one of my fears, getting lost in an area ... I don't know where I am. Being in a ... this isn't ... I didn't grow up

in a city ... this is a city to me. Seeing bums ... and I am not ... this is not in my neighborhood. And they laugh at me when I come in, because it's like "you should have seen the people out there!" They are like relax ... I don't want anybody talking to me or nothing, just let me get back there.

Jamie (age 29) also described the uneasiness of navigating an unfamiliar community, and the desire to remain inside the halfway house.

I don't know nothing about this place [the neighborhood]. Like the other day when I went out on a job search this guy followed me from the front all the way to the bus station, and it was driving me crazy like is this man nuts or what? I just knew that I didn't want to go [outside to job search]. I just wanted to stay in this building, but I [also] want to get out.

For women not originally from the community, the benefit of living in the halfway house may help them prepare for the job market and deal with the stigma of their criminal record; however, the anxiety felt when outside the house was overwhelming for some of these women. The house served as a protective shield against the community, but only temporarily. All residents were required to leave for work and/or education regardless of their fears of traveling through an unfamiliar place.

Gaining responsibility

After obtaining employment, many women were able to maintain their jobs, develop a structured work week, and begin building a savings account for release. For residents with little or no employment background, the halfway house also provided them with the opportunity to build their résumés and gain new experience. It also provided residents with a sense of responsibility and accomplishment. To Jenny, a participant with four months of residency at the halfway house, the routine of going to work, obtaining a paycheck, and paying bills provided her with skills to maintain a daily structure and live a law-abiding lifestyle.

I have never maintained a job, me job oh hell no. Keeping a job for me is an achievement already. Paying my maintenance fees, getting my own personal things, it's like an achievement. So that I just look at it like helping me get ready for coming out. That's how I put it in my mind. It's just another thing you have to do to so you can teach yourself to do the right thing. Because if you keep doing it like that you will do it without even knowing it. And that's the way I have been trying to do things.

At 41, Jenny had been in and out of prison multiple times. She had an extensive substance abuse history, had experienced sexual abuse and neglect as a child, and had no employment history. Based on her prior history, it is unlikely she would have been successful obtaining and maintaining work if released straight to the community. Obtaining legitimate work became an empowering experience

that led Jenny to recognize that improving other areas of her life was possible as well. Marie, a participant with a very similar background, also recognized the value of learning responsibility.

This is more like the real world, you know, because you have to go out there and you have to face them responsibilities. You have to pay to live there. If you work you have to give them 30% of your pay and you have to give them 17% of your pay just for your fines, you know? So, you see, you have to pay back, you know, what you took from the community. You're paying them back. You know, you have responsibilities. It's not like, hey, everything's free. It teaches you.

Learning to pay bills, restitution, and rent is part of being a productive citizen in the community. Participants who held positive views of the halfway house and recognized the value of following program requirements were also proactive in their reentry transition. They discussed future plans, began taking steps to reach their goals, and expressed an overall sense of relief that they were finally moving on.

“Can't make moves by myself”

Even though the majority of participants acknowledged some degree of surveillance and control over their lives, they were willing to follow rules and rarely questioned staff about the program's policies. The halfway house was viewed as an opportunity for transformation, one that they did not have while incarcerated. A less common view was a perception that the house was simply an extension of prison. The freedoms and opportunities identified by the majority were not embraced by a select few who shared the perception that they were in a system of control and did not have the freedom to control their own lives. “This is the system” was a common phrase.

Participants with negative perceptions stated that they would rather have finished their time in prison or another facility. These women perceived the halfway house as worse than prison because although they had opportunity to work and leave the facility, their lives were still under constant surveillance. They either perceived the facility to be too far from their family, viewed staff as unprofessional, or they felt too restricted by the house rules. To April, 37, the idea of transitioning from prison straight to community release would have been an easier process.

You are still locked up. We had a lot of girls run—I would never—‘cause I have a daughter who is sick, but I think if I was a weak individual I would have been skated out of here. Because of their rules, like I said you are out their working and stuff but then you have to come back and listen to the crap over here. This is aggravating here. Once you get out here in society once again it's like everything is coming at you. Whereas if you are in prison and you are coming out here it's a little—to me it would have probably been easier. In here everything gets to me and it is because I can't make moves by myself.

April spent three months at the halfway house and was one week from release at the time of the interview. She discussed the challenges of securing housing. She was unable to return to her family's home because her live-in partner had a criminal record. At the time of her release, the parole board denied her address and instead sent her to a homeless shelter until she was able to secure housing that was appropriate according to parole standards. During the interview, April expressed frustration over her housing situation. Prior to her incarceration, she was able to successfully support her three teenage children through her employment as a nurse and a supplemental income of selling drugs. To April, the inability to live the same lifestyle and make her own decisions about housing was disempowering and prevented her from addressing her reentry needs.

Other residents expressed concerns about not being able to leave the halfway house without an escort because they were classified as an A304 offender. The New Jersey A304 law prohibits furloughs for prisoners convicted of certain violent crimes (such as murder, manslaughter, rape, robbery, kidnapping, or aggravated assault). Six participants were convicted of violent crimes and were classified as A304 offenders. These participants were unable to leave the building without a staff escort, with the exception of going to work. This created a greater dependency on staff, as A304 residents were forced to rely on staff to take them to the bank, shopping, apartment searching, and other personal errands. Several participants complained that staff members were often too busy to take them out. For example, Rachel shared:

Like my main issue is that I can't go out to the bank or to shopping alone. That gets on my nerves because it's like either they don't have the ride to take me or they're too busy to do it, so that's frustrating. That's like my main issue with that, because I can't go shopping and things like that for myself. But other than that it's just something that I have to deal with for the next 10 months.

Although women expressed frustration over the inability to "make moves" by themselves, they still followed the regulations of the program. The threat of returning to prison was a strong deterrent against breaking program rules. Only two participants were sent back to prison for breaking program rules. One woman (age 23) violated rules for having a urine sample that tested positive for drugs, and the other (age 28) for being in a part of the halfway house prohibited to residents. Both participants were first-time offenders, with a GED or diploma, and no major history of substance abuse or childhood abuse. Nothing disclosed during their interviews indicated that they would have violated rules. Both discussed being motivated to do well because they wanted to return to their children.

Only one participant, Deedra (age 35), discussed several instances where she violated program rules. Deedra would often "deviate"⁵ when out on a community pass by going to locations that were not approved by the halfway house. She had an extensive history of substance abuse, mental health problems, and had a criminal record. She had no family support and was estranged from her husband and children. During the interview, Deedra was unable to explain why she broke program rules. Staff

did not send her back to prison and instead placed her on more restrictive supervision. After spending three months at the halfway house, she was released to a homeless shelter, ended up violating her parole within the first month, and returned to prison.⁶ In contrast, Phyllis (age 46) a resident with an almost identical case profile as Deedra, excelled in the halfway house. Phyllis was extremely motivated and, as she put it, was “tired” of cycling in and out of institutions. She described the many resources at the halfway house that she took advantage of. Phyllis spent less than six months at the halfway house and participated in mental health treatment, substance abuse programs, and found housing in a transitional living program. Both Phyllis and Deedra were interviewed several days before their official release from the halfway house. The only identifiable difference between the two women was the excitement and high motivation expressed by Phyllis. The desire to make a change and proactively take steps to be successful was absent during the interview with Deedra.

Just going with the program

Some women had been through the system multiple times or had been in the system for many years and followed the structure of the program just to fulfill the requirements. They did not trust the process and saw it as an extension of prison. They were not completely invested in their rehabilitation compared to those who perceived the program as a positive place to address needs. I asked Carol, 32, if there was anything the community correction facility does to help her prepare for release, and as she talked, her demeanor changed from interested in the interview to one of boredom. She repeatedly rolled her eyes and shrugged her shoulders.

They listen to me ... (resident yawns) ... they help me ... I've been doing this for so long, you understand so it's all the same. Everything is the same. They are doing nothing different than I've been doing before here, before here. I really can't say I am going to go out and be able to use the tools that they give me. This is all just ... the same. Everything I've been doing is the same [as prison]. The real test comes when I leave. That's when I know if I can use everything they taught me, which can't come to mind yet and I can remember.

Carol, unlike many other women in this study, did not have solid release plans. She had been at the halfway house six months and was interviewed one month prior to her release. Carol was not proactive in her reentry preparation, was unsure about the status of her housing, and did not have employment prospects lined up. She eventually returned to prison on a parole violation several months after release from the halfway house. When released from the halfway house, Carol went straight to a homeless shelter, and although she was employed during her stay at the house, she was unable to maintain her job due to the long distance between her work place and the shelter. Carol's reentry barriers extended beyond the lack of housing and work. Having spent all of her adult life institutionalized, Carol had lost most of her outside support network, which now consisted only of friends and family inside prison. Returning to custody for a parole violation was not perceived as a

setback. Carol's experience, although distinctive from other participants in this study, points to the unique challenges long-term prisoners experience during transition.

Other women with long histories of cycling in and out of prison shared similarities with Carol. Deedra also shared Carol's nonchalant demeanor. They were not invested in their reentry preparation and seemed to just go along with the program. Like Carol, Deedra had few family and community supports in place; she also struggled to secure housing. They were very nonchalant about what would happen to them in the future. During their stay at the halfway house, they placed little emphasis on developing their support networks or ensuring they were transferred to a supportive living environment.

Summary and discussion

There were two general narratives that emerged during the analysis of women's halfway house experience. The majority viewed the halfway house as a helping institution. They shared a belief that the halfway house was an important intermediate phase linking the transition between institution and community. It was perceived as a place to start the employment process, search for housing, and reconnect with family. Working, paying maintenance fees, and following a structure instilled a sense of accomplishment and empowerment for many women, especially for those women who were employed for the first time. The halfway house also served as a safety net for participants who had a long history with the drug culture in the community. The slow readjustment to the area allowed women to deal with community pressures while having a supportive environment to address their issues. This safety net also served as a place of respite for women unfamiliar to the area.

However, not all women shared the helping institution perspective. To some, the halfway house was just an extension of the system. It was not viewed as a place to advance and prepare for release—rather the halfway house was just another barrier in the overall experience. Participants who shared this narrative were not proactive in their release preparation. They expressed frustration about not being able to make their own decisions, struggled to follow the strict structure, or felt it was not their responsibility to find work and housing on their own. Long-term prisoners and those with a history of cycling in and out prison went along with the program but were not invested in their transition. Their participation in the program was superficial and their plans for release were minimal or non-existent. Their lack of motivation may have been attributed to their long history within the system and the monotony of the experience.

The findings from this study also allude to the contradictory role the halfway house plays in the transitional process. The program is designed to help residents get established for community release. It is a program funded and monitored by the New Jersey Department of Corrections and the New Jersey State Parole Board with accountability and rigid program requirements well documented and implemented throughout. Residents are made aware that if they do not follow the program

requirements, they risk returning to prison. Some participants in this study developed negative perceptions of the entire program due to the rigid restrictions and developed the view that the halfway house was “an extension of the system.” Others recognized the restrictions and rules as a necessary component in their transition process. They described needing rules in their lives, developed responsibility from the work and payment requirements, and learned how to emotionally deal with the stigma of having a criminal record.

The women who participated in my research came from varying backgrounds. Their experiences and perceptions were often similar, regardless of where they came from. The major difference existed among women from the community versus those from other areas of the state. Women originally from the surrounding neighborhood viewed the halfway house as a stepping stone or safe haven which bridged the gap between prison and the streets. Women from other areas of the state, especially those never exposed to inner city communities, experienced fear and anxiety when leaving for job hunts, shopping, etc. Furthermore, women who perceived the halfway house as a positive helping institution and a place to address reentry needs expressed high levels of motivation and a strong desire to move on with their lives. Regardless of perceptions, the majority of participants (with the exception of three women who violated program rules) followed the requirements because the reality of returning to prison was viewed as unfavorable.

Speaking to women directly about their experiences sheds light on how best to improve the reentry process at various transitional stages. Research of this nature is not, however, without limitations. The method of recording interviews may have intimidated participants and prevented truthful discussion about the halfway house experience, although many participants spoke in great detail about their experiences and did not appear threatened by the recording device. These women gave very descriptive responses and provided more information than was asked of them. Several made comments about how the interview was actually helpful for them. Others mentioned that they were “use to telling their story,” referring to the multiple intakes and assessments throughout their incarceration process. Several women alluded to the interview as a helpful event. For example, one resident was forced to end the interview early because of a scheduled meeting with the employment specialist. She asked if she could continue the interview later in the day and stated that the interview was helping her think about her plans for the future. When asked a series of questions about release plans, another woman said that she had not thought about it yet, but the interview was helping her recognize that she needed to begin thinking about housing and treatment after leaving the halfway house. There were many other anecdotes that led me to believe that the women were genuinely forthcoming and truthful. The fact that I was of the same gender as participants and had previously worked as a reentry service provider with a similar population may have helped develop quick rapport. Perhaps my presence over a six month period made participants feel comfortable talking

about their experiences. Of course, there were exceptions—the few women who provided very short responses and finished the interview in less than an hour.

Another limitation of this research is the size and type of sample selected for the study. Although qualitative research is the best method for gathering perceptions of a phenomenon, due to the small number of participants and single site selection, caution should be used when generalizing these findings to other female community correction program. Another limitation is the lack of follow-up interviews. I only interviewed three participants after their release from the halfway house. Because few follow-ups took place, it is difficult to make conclusions about whether the halfway house impacted reentry success. Future research on this topic should include follow-up interviews.

Several program and policy recommendations should be considered for future research and program development. First, it is important to recognize that even when reentry services are readily available, not all women will take advantage of them. Most programs require clients to be proactive in securing services and employment. Understanding how women perceive and cope with a less restrictive correctional setting will allow program administrators and front-line staff to adapt their approach when working with this population. In my study, the threat of returning to prison motivated many women to follow program requirements. Developing other mechanisms to motivate them to be successful may further enhance their desire to be successful. Additional research is needed to better understand how women's perceptions of the transitional process contributes to their motivation to engage in rehabilitative services and impacts their community outcomes.

Second, the short period of time many women spend in reentry programs restricts the ability to address all needs. Developing linkages with other community providers to provide a continuity of care will further enhance the reentry process, especially if it includes transitional housing. Several participants in this study left the halfway house without their new housing in place. Two of these women violated their parole within a few months of release to a homeless shelter. Changing policies regarding length of stay at the halfway house may be necessary to ensure all women have enough time to secure safe and affordable housing. Extending the length of program stay and developing continuum of care services would be especially beneficial for long-term prisoners and those with lengthy histories of cycling in and out of jail and prison.

Third, the employment requirements of the halfway house program restricted qualified residents from obtaining meaningful work. Many residents, regardless of employment and education background, found work at fast food restaurants. The requirement to find work within 30 days restricted residents' ability to find jobs that met their employment/education skills. Securing work that is compatible with skills should be a goal of reentry programs. Even if securing immediate work is a mandate of the program, residents should be encouraged (if not required) to continue their job search until they find compatible employment.

Finally, a residential reentry program (like the program used by the halfway house in my research) is extremely important in helping all offenders start the transition from prison to community. Securing employment, saving money, and addressing other reentry needs allow women to deal with the anxiety of these events in a supportive setting. Creating more opportunities for these types of programs will benefit not only the returning prisoner population, but will serve as a public safety measure and benefit the larger community as well.

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Footnotes

1. Halfway houses are often referred to as community correction facilities, community correction centers, and residential reentry centers. [↵](#)
2. The 2 women who refused to participate in the interview simply declined after the researcher explained the study. They did not give reasons why they declined. The researcher did not gather case file data on these 2 women to further explain why they declined. [↵](#)
3. In 2006, the year before this study was conducted, 35% of the female prison population in New Jersey were incarcerated on a violent charge, and 28% with a drug related charge (NJDOC, 2006). [↵](#)
4. Instability in the home was defined as having one or more of the following characteristics: neglect, abuse, and/or parental substance abuse. [↵](#)
5. A term used by both halfway house staff and residents when someone violates halfway house rules. Residents may receive a sanction (e.g., loss of privileges) instead of returning to prison. [↵](#)
6. I searched the NJDOC website one year after all interviews were completed to identify whether participants returned to prison. [↵](#)