The Community Prisoner Mother Program

The Voices You Haven’t Heard

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And 9 Very Dedicated Researchers
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Acknowledgments:

I want to begin by saying how proud I am to be able to work with such a remarkable group of women as co-researchers on this project. Your courage throughout this journey inspires me on a daily basis and I am honored that you decided to join in doing this important work. Each of you dedicated your heart and souls to this project to ensure that we tell the story that has not been told. You took risks and allowed yourselves to be vulnerable, and in many cases you had not done before now and I am so amazed by your bravery. You have all learned that you do have a voice and that it does matter and I thank you for allowing me to be a part of that.

I also want to thank Cassandra Loch for always supporting me on my path. Your encouragement and guidance along the way have been an invaluable resource to me. I appreciate you allowing me to work with Prototypes and the participants to create this paper. Our hope is that you find it useful in your continued quest to ensure that Prototypes continues to serve those in need. We hope that the voices shared in this piece also give you encouragement and provide affirmation that you are traveling down the right path. Prototypes is an organization that I am so proud to be a part of and your leadership has ensured that Prototypes has continued to stay focused on their mission.

Lastly I want to thank everyone in the Ontario program this semester as I learned so much from each and every one of you. This program has been something I have wanted to do even before I was accepted to Pitzer. My fellow classmates never cease to amaze me with their brilliance. I am so grateful that I was able to take it this semester and it met every expectation and more. I am indebted to both Professor Phillips and Professor Hicks-Peterson for teaching me and guiding me throughout this semester and preparing
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**Introduction and Statement of Purpose:**

It is definitely not news that our current prison system has serious problems and that they have become more numerous and more crowded than anyone had ever imagined. It is a problem that definitely needs attention, but the attention should be thoughtful and planned out in a way that it does not subsequently create an even bigger disaster for the state. The state was forced after many years to address these serious concerns related to overcrowding and all of the health and safety issues that came along with those problems.

As a proposed solution California recently enacted legislation that will attempt to address these concerns but consequently it will result in the closure of seven programs throughout the state that currently provide treatment services to incarcerated mothers while maintaining the bond with their children. Under the guise of reducing prison overcrowding AB109 will not only put an end to these valuable programs but in addition it will result in the release of individuals with no services or support and if they re-offend they will be sentenced to county jail or probation, systems that are already overburdened. These individuals no longer being on parole will not only be released untreated but they will also be ineligible for things like mental health care and medications. Under the realignment (AB109) guidelines all violations will now be served in six month increments
in the county jail system. In addition, under the current plan, all of the mother child
programs will close at the end of this fiscal year and all of the women who have not been
released by that date will be sent back to prison and separated from their children, many
of whom will re-enter the foster care system.

The state of California has been one of the few states in our nation to enact
legislation that would allow mothers to complete their prison sentence while maintaining
a bond with their children. These valuable services have allowed families to stay together
while obtaining needed services to address issues that may have led to their incarceration.
Since 1980, these programs have served families as an alternative to prison and ensured
that families were not separated. The re-alignment under AB109 will shift all non-violent,
non-serious offenders to the local level and these offenders will now be sentenced to the
county jail system and once again female offenders will be forced to be separated from
their children.

This paper will be focused on providing a firsthand view of the impact the
mother-child programs have had as an alternative to prison. We hope that as a result of
our findings that these services will be evaluated for the benefit and cost effectiveness
before making a decision to discontinue them. If the re-alignment continues on its
current course then our hope is that this paper will show the benefits of these programs to
the county as an alternative to incarceration. Through this research we hope to broaden
peoples understanding of the impact these programs have had and that the voices of those
who are impacted by them should be taken into consideration before critical decisions are
made. The impact of the closure of these programs, as this paper will show reaches far
beyond the offender herself.
Our work will be focused on the narratives of the women who are impacted by directly by this program. These women have lived within the CPMP program and have also served time in traditional prison settings. As an alternative sentencing program the Community Prisoner Mother Programs are able to offer so much more than what is offered behind the walls of the institutions. We will focus on several different themes that emerged in our research in addition to reviewing the current crisis.

The Organization:

PROTOTYPES’ mission is to rebuild the lives of women, children and communities impacted by substance abuse, mental illness and domestic violence. They promote self-sufficiency by providing integrated and comprehensive programs and ensuring safety and shelter for those in need. PROTOTYPES is a 501(c) (3) nonprofit organization established in 1986 by Dr. Vivian Brown and Maryann Fraser, LCSW, MBA. From the very beginning, the founders envisioned a unique social service organization dedicated to meeting emerging community needs by developing and improving treatment methods and community reach. Their goal was to ensure that women could get services that were customized to meet their needs and that took into consideration their role as mothers (www.Prototypes.org).1

Prior to PROTOTYPES opening its doors, women facing these issues could only get necessary services if they turned their children over to the foster care system or left them with family. The founders recognized that women were usually dealing with more

1Prototypes website.  www.prototypes.org
than one issue concurrently, yet there was not a single treatment program that was equipped to deal with them all in one place. Women who had both substance abuse and mental health issues were often told that their issues had to be addressed in separate programs. In response to these serious gaps in treatment, PROTOTYPES opened its doors in 1986 with a clear mission to change the way communities sought treatment (www.prototypes.org)².

Today, under the leadership of the current President and CEO, Cassandra Loch, PROTOTYPES has positioned itself to be on the forefront in the field of behavioral health and will continue to be one of the nations’s leading service providers. PROTOTYPES, armed with the tools necessary to deal with the changing environment that will take place under healthcare reform, hopes to continue to serve more than 12,000 women, children and men each year. PROTOTYPES remains focused on rebuilding the lives of women, children and communities impacted by substance abuse, mental illness and domestic violence.

**Personal Reason for Interest:**

Over the last thirteen years of my career I have had the pleasure of working with the families served in the Community Prisoner Mother Program. This work has been some of the most rewarding of my career, as it gives me fulfillment to know that if not for these programs these families would have been separated, resulting in further trauma being imposed on the children of these offenders. My work as a provider in the field of

² Prototypes website.  [www.prototypes.org](http://www.prototypes.org)
addiction treatment has been focused on helping families to heal and attempt to address the generational issues related to their substance abuse and mental health. I have worked in the field for more than twenty years and as the Director of Prototypes I have been able to see the transformations that have taken place in the lives of clients we serve.

I myself come from a similar background as many of my clients. I was raised in a very dysfunctional environment riddled with addiction and abuse. This very much shapes who I am today and impacts my values and how I look at the world. The shaping of most of my belief system did not begin to take place for me until much later in life. In fact my values and the way I examine life did not really begin to change until I became pregnant with my daughter. Prior to that date I was lost in my own addiction and despair, but something changed inside of me the day I found out that I was pregnant. I knew that I had to change my life and maybe it was because I finally felt like I had a reason to live, a reason to try and make my life better. I sought help through a twelve step support group and from that day forward my life began to change. I was enrolled as a participant in PROTOTYPES residential program as an alternative to going to prison, not under the Community Prisoner Mother Program, but another alternative sentencing program. I know today that had I gone to prison everything would have been different in my life; I would have lost custody of my daughter and all of my motivation to go on. The fact that I was able to have my daughter in the program, not only gave me huge support as a new mother, it also gave me all of the motivation I needed to change my life.

As I would soon find out being a parent changes everything about the way you think about life. You become secondary to everything as your child comes first in all your affairs. I am fully aware having done this work for so long that this is not the story for
some mothers, but it is my story and I do believe that it is the story for many others in my same situation if they are afforded the opportunity to find out.

My research interest is rooted in my desire to continue to be a force for change in the lives of mothers who are seeking their own transformations. This project was a collaboration in which all who were involved shared their voices in regards to this important issue. My hope is that these voices will be heard and that changes will be made to ensure that families are not separated. Optimally, the goal would be that the children and families that are impacted will continue to receive the services that are needed. My goal is to allow you to hear the perspectives of these families first hand and that you take their feedback into consideration.

**Methods/Methodology:**

I now have a clearer understanding that our methods are informed by the methodology we chose. The methodology we use is directly related to discovering or producing knowledge based on a specific framework. This project is based strongly in feminist methodology based on the fact that the core of the evaluation is focused on women for women. I chose to do a participatory action research project which entails the participants of the evaluation being co-researchers on the project. We conducted the research by documenting the narratives of those impacted by the Community Prisoner Mother Program in the hope to create positive social change and facilitate a process in which their voices are heard.

One of the methods we used to achieve this was participant observation which consisted of my field experience that was conducted as direct observation of the program activities. This was very difficult for me as I had to genuinely work towards looking at the
environment with a different lense. I struggled with this in the beginning as I was so accustomed to everything and the way that it works. My observations became more critical as I tried to step back a bit to observe the environment as if I had not been there before. This experience although difficult, was very valuable and contributed to allowing me to see the program in a different way. I would observe and interact with the clients and try to see things form their perspective. In the process of my observation I tried to focus on the experiences of the participants and how they function within the structure.

The other methods that we used were participant interviews and focus groups. As co-researchers of the project the participants conducted interviews with one another and transcribed all of their own notes. All of the researchers who were involved with the project were trained to conduct interviews and everyone participated in formulating the questions that would be used for both the interviews and the focus groups. We decided as a group that we would obtain the best data if I would conduct the focus group and my co-researchers would conduct the one on one interviews.

As stated previously one methodology we employed was definitely Feminist theory due to the fact that we are writing about women’s experiences, as told by women. As I was doing this work I remained aware of my own positionality and my experiences as a woman in recovery and as the director of Prototypes and how that played a role in our collective story. This was the framework/methodology that informed most of our work together as a group. However I do believe that Anti-positivism played a role as well because we did determine that there is not just one truth in this situation. All of the researchers on the project agreed that there are multiple truths represented, which is the core of Anti-positivism.
Design

This qualitative evaluation explored the multiple perspectives of women involved in the Community Prisoner Mother Program and the impact that the program has had in their lives and the lives of their children and families. A series of semi-structured interviews were conducted by the co-researchers with women in the program and these interviews were tape-recorded for the sake of accuracy in analysis. The interviews were conducted by the participants with one another which allowed for the opportunity to speak more freely about the program. The decision as to who would conduct the group and the interviews was determined by a group decision which included all researchers as we considered my position within the program.

Sample

The sampling procedure was constructed to allow all participants who wish to participate to be involved in the project in some way with the understanding that they must maintain a strong commitment to be a part of all activities. The project began the first week with eleven and ended up with a core group of nine participants. All participants were self selected based on the following criteria; (1) in treatment for at least 6 weeks from the start date, (2) active in the Community Prisoner Mother Program, (3) former participation in the program for a minimum of 6 months or more.

Data Collection

Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with participants. The one-on-one interviews were conducted in a private location within the facility so as to preserve confidentiality. Interviews were tape-recorded with the permission of the participants. We utilized an interview guide that was developed by all of the researchers and it was used to
structure the interviews. Extra prompts were utilized to encourage the participants to expand on their answers. We also conducted a focus group in which we discussed the impact of the program on participants, children and family members.

**Analysis**

Following the data collection, audio recordings of the interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were then reviewed and analyzed for recurring patterns and themes. Themes were categorized and reported and supplemented by verbatim quotes to illustrate the essence of the patterns and themes.

**Limitations**

The result of this study was limited due to a small sample size and use of non-random, convenience sampling. The specific program design and geographic location may have influenced the responses given by participants in the program being that they are self-selected as a sampling pool and therefore may not be true for participants at other facilities. In addition, my strong involvement with the program still remain a risk of creating bias however we structured our data collection in a way that attempted to address this as much as possible. The nature of qualitative studies creates a possibility of social desirability and researcher biases. Cultural differences between the participants and researchers also have the potential to affect the way questions and responses are interpreted.

**Literature Review: Discussion of Findings**

**Background**

The CPMP was established in 1980 due to the enactment of Assembly Bill 512, a piece of legislation that was designed to reunite eligible, low-risk inmate mothers with their children under age six. These programs under strict criteria allow female inmates
who are parents and are able to demonstrate that they were the primary caretaker of their children prior to incarceration, to complete their sentences in the CPMP. In order to ensure public safety inmates with convictions for violent offenses, a history of child abuse, sexual child abuse or child cruelty, or a history of prison disciplinary escapes are not eligible. The California Department of Corrections determines eligibility and refers inmates to the CPMP based on eligible infractions or on a file review. “California is the only state that allows a woman to keep her newborn with her until the end of her sentence.”

The Prototypes CPMP that we are evaluating has been in existence since 1998. The CPMP programs are structured to allow inmates to live in a secured residential setting in the community where they can care for their children. The therapeutic structure of the program is designed to provide women with parenting skills, substance abuse treatment, and educational, vocational and basic life-skills training. In these programs the children can also receive the necessary services needed to help support the overall health and welfare of the families served.

The women in the Community Prisoner Mother Program learn about their ability to apply to the program after they have already been sentenced to prison. In fact, the application to be accepted into the CPMP program cannot even begin until the inmate has been processed and received into the institution. In some cases it takes several months to get approved to be admitted. It was suggested by the group that it would be a much better option if the CPMP program were offered at the time of sentencing. One participant stated:

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“We shouldn’t have to go all the way to prison before we are offered it because I think I did not know anything about it until I got to prison and I think it should be offered at sentencing for people who are going to prison”.

If these procedures were modified, then there would not be an extended delay between the time of arrest and the time it takes for the children to be reunited with their primary caregivers. As this paper will demonstrate this is a critical issue to consider as separating a parent from a child is a very serious matter on several different levels.

**Current Crisis**

After the War on Drugs mass incarceration, decades of overcrowding, and unthinkable conditions, the California Prison System had reached its saturation point and something had to be done. “The failing correctional system is the largest and most immediate crisis facing policy-makers. For decades, governors and lawmakers fearful of appearing soft on crime have failed to muster the political will to address the looming crisis. And now their time has run out.”

Now more than four years after this observation in the Little Hoover Commission Executive Summary the State of California has enacted legislation in an effort to address these critical issues, but as a result some valuable services will be lost for the thousands of inmates who will be impacted. One example of this impact is the closure of seven community programs throughout the state that provide alternative community sentencing programs for mothers while continuing to maintain the bond with their children. There are a total of five Family Foundation programs where mothers and children can stay up to a year and two Community Prisoner Mother Programs where mothers and children can stay up to six years. As a result of these

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closures some mothers may ultimately be separated from their children and returned to a traditional prison setting unless other arrangements can be made.

As of January 01, 2011, another piece of critical legislation was enacted that will allow for the early release of non-violent, non-serious, and non-registerable sex offenders under the Alternative Custody Program. This program will allow eligible women to complete the remainder of their sentences in the community. This seems like a good alternative for those who qualify under the eligibility criterion that is set. As it stands currently - many of the women who are serving time in the CPMP programs that are closing may be eligible for this program. However there is some concern as to time lines and the approval process and there remains some question as to the feasibility of their applications being approved prior to the closure of the programs. In addition, some of the participants who are eligible also have some fears that they will not receive the necessary services that they need in order to succeed. One participant states:

“I really think the ACP to a certain extent is a huge blessing but I feel that it has not been thoroughly thought out by the state because my counselor was looking in to it on-line because they have it on the correctional web-site but it states all of the things that are going to be offered like vocational programs, educational programs but we have not heard anything about any of that- when they have come to talk to us about it there is none of that.”

There is still much that remains to be seen in regards to the Alternative Custody Program being that it is so new and we have no data to report as to its successes or failures. Thus far in the Prototypes CPMP no applications have been processed for release as of yet.
Mother-Child Bond

The bond between a mother and her child is without parallel and was definitely cited as one of the most important motivating factors to succeed in treatment. “A review of the literature examining the effects of incarceration on the family, including specific analysis of mothers, revealed that incarcerated parents indeed value their children and their role as a parent.”\(^5\) The importance of these relationships was a prominent theme during our study throughout all interviews and the focus group. All of the participants discussed the importance of maintaining the relationship with their children and cited this as a motivating factor for them to change. One participant shared: “Now everything I do I think about Sarah and I think about the choices I make in my life and how they are going to affect me and her and getting my three girls together.” Each of the participants was able to cite an example of how having their children with them has made a huge difference in their treatment episode.

“By me participating in a program that is about mothers and children I have been able to get more parenting skills and refine and polish the ones I had out there. You really don’t take time to take parenting classes out there unless it’s demanded of you.” My participation in the program has forced me to learn parenting skills, education and communication with my other children out there”.

Another participant says: “My biggest benefit is having my daughter here, learning how to be a mom- a good mom this time.” The program is centered on learning positive parenting techniques by participation in hands-on parenting activities with their children as they go through their treatment episode. All of the program participants work in the

parenting centers which are designed to enhance parenting techniques by providing consistent interaction with children at different developmental stages.

All of the participants were able to talk in depth about the benefits they experienced in relation to the bond with their children. But they also were able to share the distress in regards to the alternative had these programs not been available for them. A participant shares:

“The benefit like I said my daughter she was put into the foster care system when I caught this case and if it weren’t for these types of programs I would have lost her to the system, I wouldn’t of had that opportunity to fight for her as I did coming here and that’s my biggest benefit - that’s my story.”

Another mother shared about the process of losing that bond with your child and how detrimental it can be:

“I think it would have just really taken me out because losing a child is not a normal thing for a woman to have to go through, it’s not okay, it’s not something that you can just work through.”

Over and over again the women shared the importance of their roles as mothers and how this program has impacted their bonds with their children in a positive way and how things would have been so different for themselves and their children had they not been afforded the opportunity to participate in the program. One participant shares about her bond with her child now after being separated during the time that she was waiting to come into the program - a total of fifteen months:

“Now she knows I am her mom and she knows I am not going anywhere and if I would have still been up in prison doing the rest of my prison term
I wouldn’t even have that. I wouldn’t have even known anything about my child; I wouldn’t know anything about her. So this program has really affected the mother-child bond between me and my daughter in a positive manner by reuniting us and keeping us together and reunifying our family.”

We have demonstrated the impact that it has had on the mothers and how they value the bond with their children but there was a stronger sense of concern by all of the participants as to what happens to the children if these programs go away.

**Impact on Children**

The women involved in this study definitely stressed the need to consider the children that will be affected by these changes that are taking place. As our representatives consider legislation that will actually result in improved outcomes and the overall health and welfare of our communities, one factor that needs to be weighed heavily is the children that are involved with these cases. “The public systems designed to protect society in general and children in particular do not “see” children of arrestees and prisoners. These children’s needs are seldom addressed; even their existence often goes unnoticed and usually unrecorded. The consequence can be, and sometimes has been, children left alone or with caregivers unprepared to keep them until their parents return.”⁶ Our participants cited this as a major concern due to the fact that many of their family members would have been significantly burdened had they been charged with having to care for their children during their incarceration. One of the mothers talked about where her son would have been placed had she not have came into the program;

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“Probably to my mom, which is not the best place. She is on welfare, has a part-time job and it just isn’t a good place for my son to be but that is probably where he would have went- if not there, my grandmother wanted me to adopt him out but I do not think I could have done that.”

This same mother and child will be negatively impacted by the closure of the program due to the circumstances of her case. At the time of the closure she will still have 45 days left on her sentence and she does not qualify for the Alternative Custody Program, therefore, at this point if circumstances do not change she will be sent back to prison and be separated from her child. A child, who was born in the program and has been with his mother since birth, may in fact be separated from her while she completes the remainder of her sentence, and be placed with her mother or in foster care. Another poignantly shared about her loss of the bond she had with her child when she went to prison:

“When I was up at CCWF for the year, I didn’t have a bond with my child. The only communication I had with my child were the few phone calls that I got along with the weekly letters I would send to her so I didn’t so much have a physical and emotional bond with her, but I do now.”

If the plan for re-alignment continues on its current course and these mother-child programs are closed then what will happen to these relationships?

As AB109 legislation goes into effect and the supervision of these cases is shifted from the state to local supervision we must not lose sight of the impact incarceration has on a child when a parent is incarcerated. There are many things to reflect on as our state looks to address these issues, which include huge financial burdens to local budgets, including the cost local child welfare and most likely increased TANF assistance to
already financially burdened families who are forced to care for children in the absence of their incarcerated parent. “These financial costs are compounded by the generational effects of incarceration women. Children of incarcerated parents are five time more likely to serve time in prison than children without incarcerated parents.”  

In addition, “Disruption of families due to parental incarceration is an increasingly prevalent problem. It often affects children in families with the fewest resources to cope with the stresses that come with a loss of a family member.” One participant spoke of the burden her husband had to endure being the only one left to care for their five children:  

“I got reports from the school and from my sister that my kids were not being dressed properly or they were wearing the same clothes for two-three days, just different things like that or they would show up late to class, they would say they were hungry and had not had breakfast and so I started to get these reports and so then I did consider the fact that my husband had to get up at 5:30 a.m. to go to work and left them to fend for themselves”  

As a result of being in the program this mother was able to work with the school through phone calls and timely written correspondence to ensure that her children received the additional support that they needed in this situation. She was very clear about the fact that had she been in an institution this would have been impossible for her to navigate. All of these factors need to be weighed heavily as we try to make changes to our failing prison system. It is evident here that there is much more than just the offender that needs to be considered as these decisions are being made. One participant was adamant about

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her need to let us know that the children in these situations are impacted the most, she stated:

“I think they really have to pay attention these kids, okay them closing the programs like this they may be looking at just the inmates and just the mothers but there are kids that are going to be affected by this whole change. These mothers or these inmates that aren’t going to have these programs like have kids who may be put in the foster system and who will be put in CPS and get lost and when we are done with our term what happens with those kids.”

If these offenders are not offered a chance to maintain the bonds with their children in many cases they may completely lose them.

**Relationships**

As you walk through the halls of this program you see people smiling, an occasional hug and even sometimes tears. Everyone seems to be one big family unit working together to make life a little easier for one another. At any time of the day you can walk through the campus and see someone consoling someone else or you will see them interacting with the children in a very natural way. It was evident in our work that the value of relationships is very important to the participants of the project. They cook together like they are at home, they watch each other’s children like they are their own family, and they even bicker with one another like sisters at times. One participant talks about the family like environment in the program:

“This program has really changed my life and my experience has been really good here. All of the girls are like family to me. I was reunited with my daughter when she was four months old; this program has really changed my life.”
All of the program participants confirm that this feeling of family amongst their peers has been an integral part of their recovery process.

There has been research to show how important relationships are to a woman’s healthy development as she tries to address issues that led to her criminal behavior. “Relational theory recognizes the different ways women and men develop psychologically and the centrality of relationships in women’s lives”. Therefore these healthy connections that they are developing with one another are one of the keys to their success as they begin to work towards building healthy lifestyles. The program by design is focused gender responsiveness which takes these issues into account. Gender responsiveness is defined as “creating an environment…that reflects an understanding of the realities of women’s lives and addresses the issues of the women.”

One participant shares:

“My relationships with other people have just excelled I know how to communicate better, I know how to be honest, I know how to be assertive, you know and that is something that I’ve got from a program, got from treatment”

These kinds of interactions with one another are evident when you spend time observing how they navigate their daily lives with one another. All of the program functions appear to be designed to support the enhancement of daily life skills in addition to bolstering self

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esteem and communication skills. One participant shares about the positive relationships her son has formed since he has been in the program with her;

“Oh yeah like the people we’ve met here he’s like grown so close to them, he loves them and he is just really loved here. Not to say he wouldn’t be loved at home but the kind of love you have here for other peoples kids and your peers it’s like a bonding kind of love that’s hard to find.”

In Stephanie Covington’s work with female offenders she asserts that “to improve behavioral outcomes for women, it is critical to provide a safe and supportive setting for all services. A profile of women in the criminal justice system shows that many have grown up in less than optimal family and community environments.”¹¹ This theory demonstrates the reason the women in this setting are consistently forming new relationships with one another that are loving and supportive as they grow in their recovery process. This would be very difficult to replicate inside of an institution- in addition to the fact that they would not have their children in their custody.

**Prison vs. Community**

We all take things for granted in our daily lives- simple things like brushing your teeth for instance. For a woman in prison something as simple as brushing your teeth can become a life threatening event. One of the participants shared about her experience when she first entered prison and she was housed with someone who had been given a life sentence:

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The participants shared many stories about the harsh realities of the prison environment and the lifestyle that they are forced to adapt to once they are behind those prison walls. They were able to site many examples of the violence that is a normal part of the prison environment. One of the participants shared about how she is forced to take on a different personality in prison just to survive: “I’m not really a bully but um in prison I’m different, because in prison I wouldn’t be talking I would fight a lot more if I have too.” Another participant shared after a discussion about prison turning you into a different person based on need for survival:

“I did nine months at VSPW um…and I am very impressionable, very impressionable. I was a follower so had I stayed there I would have come out like you said hardcore. I would have lost all of my morals and the kind of person that I am inside. I would have changed I would have become cold and hard just to survive in there”
All of the participants agree that the environment in prison is not conducive to any kind of lasting change or rehabilitation. In fact all of the participants agreed that the opposite effect goes into place due to the survival techniques that need to be adopted in order to navigate themselves within the inmate population.

The most important difference between the prison setting and the community setting for these participants however, were the children. This was true not only for the children that were with them in the program but for their other children as well. A participant shared about the difference her children experienced having to visit her in prison:

“One of the impacts it has had on my family is that they are just around the corner now and the setting too it is like going to see mom at a park and then when we have our fundraisers they get to have regular food and over there it is all these vending machines- and the food is very expensive and the environment is just two different worlds.”

All of the participants agreed that the prison environment is a huge barrier for their family members as they try and maintain healthy bonds with those who are waiting for them at home. The visitation within the institutions is not conducive to maintaining loving healthy bonds with your children and other family members.

**Treatment Needs**

The overall number of female prisoners in the United States has grown substantially. While the number of women in prison remains lower than the number of
men, women are entering prisons at a faster rate than men.\textsuperscript{12} Although the research on the Community Prisoner Mother Programs or the Family Foundation programs was severely lacking, there has been a considerable amount of research done on the treatment needs of female offenders. Based on this research it seems our state or local counties for that matter would be completely remiss to disregard the need for services for this population. There are many factors that lead females to become involved in criminal behavior. “The association of childhood abuse, substance abuse, comorbidity, and crime among female offenders has led many researchers to propose comprehensive treatment interventions that address these issues.” \textsuperscript{13} If we do not put our resources into providing treatment services for the issues that often times lead to criminal behavior than these reforms that are being put into place today could ultimately be ineffective. “The long-term consequences of untreated physical and mental health problems have implications for community health, as well as promoting positive health behaviors that may help to reduce future recidivism.”\textsuperscript{14}

In addition female offenders particularly those affected by substance abuse have special considerations that need to be accounted for. One participant shares:

“For me Treatment is a major benefit getting the parenting classes that I need even if it is in the parenting center, but getting those core groups that are focused around my drug addiction and my criminal behavior; those are a major benefit. I

\textsuperscript{13} Messina, Nina., and Grella, Christine. (October, 2006) “Childhood Trauma and Women’s Health Outcomes in a California Prison Population.” \textit{American Journal of Public Health}, 96 no. 1842.
\textsuperscript{14} Messina and Grella 1848
think about that I had before I came here; you know it has changed from being here. I grew up thinking it was okay to commit crime and steal things and use drugs- and that was my lifestyle. So now that I know what I know; it’s not okay I have a different view of life”

We know that dependence on and abuse of substances such as alcohol or illicit drugs may lead to negative outcomes including health complications, disruption in social support, problems with employment, legal issues, and exacerbation of mental disorders.\textsuperscript{15} For women, addiction to alcohol and drugs from the time of first use is likely to progress more quickly than for men.\textsuperscript{16} “Furthermore, surveys conducted among incarcerated women have consistently shown a strong link between childhood abuse and adult mental problems, particularly depression, post traumatic stress, panic and eating disorders. The costs of failing to diagnose and treat psychiatric disorders among offenders are high and can include unemployment, homelessness, and loss of custody of children.” The rates of co-occurring disorders are high among substance abusing women, specifically depression and anxiety disorders. Particular to the development and persistence of substance use among women are the significance of emotions and relationships. For women, interpersonal relationships as well as negative emotions are associated with the initiation of drug use as well as with relapse.\textsuperscript{17} One participant shared about her relapse and return to prison after being released with no supports in place: “Due to the fact that I did not


\textsuperscript{17} Breshears, Yeh, & Young, (2005), and National Institute on Drug Abuse. (2009, Apr.)
have a stable environment, I went back to my old behaviors, and without my kids, I lost hope, I lost everything and I have been in and out of prison ever since.”

**Transformations**

One of the most important aspects the participants felt the Community Prisoner Mother Program and the treatment they receive is the transformations that have taken place in their lives and the lives of their children. In the treatment section of this paper it is evident that these offenders are facing some serious challenges and without the necessary support and treatment they are facing huge obstacles to their success. All of the participants were able to share personal accomplishments that they feel will definitely contribute to their ability to not only remain clean and sober but remain free from the criminal behaviors that led them to prison in the first place.

As a part of the Community Prisoner Mother Program the women are offered a variety of educational and vocational training opportunities as a core function of the program. These services have benefited the participants in a number of ways- one of the participants shared about obtaining her GED: “I got my GED and I am in college and I’m with both of my children. I’m learning to be able to go out there and not want to use all the time.” She was able to identify that the process of obtaining her GED boosted her self esteem and self confidence. Another participant shares; “There are so many benefits I have received as a result of being in this program. I was able to reunite with my child; I am enrolled in GED class which is a benefit in itself for me because my last school grade of completion was ninth grade.”

In terms of other benefits and transformations the participants talked about things such as improved self worth, personal empowerment, improved parenting skills,
interpersonal growth, improved social skills, relationship skills and many other accomplishments that are contributing to their current success. One participant shared; “I did not love myself and so being in the CPMP has helped me to find out who I really am and to love myself with all of my flaws and not have to feel like I have to prove myself to anyone.” Another participant talks about her process and how she has changed as a result of the programs services;

“I work on myself… things that have bothered me for years, things that affected my self esteem and the way that I think. In the short time that I have been here I have begun to change all those things. Things that I never ever tried to change before (tears well up)…makes me emotional. It’s because I never worked on this before.”

One mother shared about the difference in the relationship with her children and her parenting skills; “I feel like my role as a mother is a hundred times better and I am open to whatever it is I need to deal with and I am not afraid to ask for help for them or me.”

All of the participants were able to cite several examples of how their lives and their children’s lives have been completely transformed as a result of being afforded the opportunity to address the issues that led them to where they are in their lives today. I can beyond doubt attest to the fact that working with these women over the course of this project you can truly see and feel the transformations that they describe.

**Participation as Researchers:**

My experience as a researcher began at a place in which I am very familiar with but conducting the research in the way that I did allowed me to experience it in a whole new manner. I had to really remove myself from what I was familiar with and look at
things as if I had not seen them before. In addition, the experience of working with the co-researchers who chose to do this work with me was not only fascinating, it was empowering. I learned so much from them through this process from each of my co-researchers.

In doing this work as a researcher I wanted to ensure that I did not objectify my co-researchers and that they felt empowered throughout the process. My hope was that they would learn about their own agency and how important their voices are. One way that we chose to address this is through a creative process that is included in the appendix of this paper. The project entitled Conclusive Evidence was a narrative art project in which the participants told their narratives in a way that reminds everyone that they are more than just an inmate, they are more than just their numbers- they are women and everything that comes along with being strong, capable women. As we debriefed about the project the co-researchers felt that this was one of the most powerful experiences for them. They spoke about the freedom they felt as they allowed themselves to be vulnerable and shared with others who they really are and that they are not defined by the fact that they are inmates.

**Ethical Considerations:**

As researchers it is so important that we adhere to certain principles and ethical standards when entering the communities that we will be working with to conduct our research. There is so much risk involved to the communities we are working with if we do not adhere to these standards. I have personally seen cases in which these standards were not followed for one reason or another and the ramifications were severe. Even in cases where the intentions were to do no harm, the unintended consequences of not
following ethical standards can be just as severe as intentional breaches. There were several issues that I had to consider before beginning my work at Prototypes.

As a quality driven researcher I had to adhere to many standards while working with my co-researchers on this project. The thing that I found to be of the utmost importance was establishing and maintaining respect with one another. I feel that as researchers we need to respect the individuals that we are working with and their community. We need to involve the community members in our process and respect the contribution that they are choosing to contribute to our research. Equally important was conducting our research with honesty, not only with the participants I was working with but also with the data collecting and presenting it. It is so important that we not fabricate, falsify, or misrepresent ourselves or our research. As researchers we have to be careful not to deceive our participants or the public in order to achieve the outcomes we had hoped for. Integrity was also of the utmost importance, and I had to act in ways that honored that. It was so important for me to keep promises and agreements that were made with the participants. Often times communities have dealt with so much disappointment and empty promises that it will be difficult to establish ourselves as trustworthy unless we act with the highest integrity at all times. It is also important to remain consistent with your words and actions, ensuring that they match.

We began this project with the goal that our research would strive to create social change, and that it would be of benefit to the community we are serving. We needed to be mindful of what it is our community needed, not just what we think they need based on our perception of their world. Confidentiality was also very important in this project and all of the researchers took this task very seriously. In our case it was not only an ethical
consideration but it is also a legal requirement. As we are dealing with individuals who were trusting in us as researchers and opening up their lives, we needed to honor that trust by keeping their confidentiality.

I think in every research situations where I will be conducting research with human subjects there will be inherent power dynamics at play. I had to be very aware of this while conducting research on this project. We had to deal with issues of insider/outsider perspectives and we had to figure out how to navigate that. I was engaged an ongoing process reflection and practice, reflecting on my own positionality in regards to race, class gender, culture and other factors that may came in to play. In my opinion one of the ways we addressed the power dynamics was having the participants being co-researchers with me conducting research. All of the participants were active and involved in every step of the process. In our project this definitely helped to balance the insider/outsider problem. In addition, the participants being active co-researchers were able to take the role of primary researchers especially while doing individual interviews.

**Policy Recommendations:**

The project from the beginning was focused on providing insight and recommendations to policy makers, the county and the state about the impact of these programs. We were cognizant of the fact that this is a huge undertaking so we did decide as a part of our action research project, the action would be to craft a letter to Senator Liu’s office telling her about our findings and asking her to review them as she considers legislation that could result in the Community Prisoner Mother Programs remaining open. We chose Senator Liu because of her interest in women’s issues specifically the inmate population. She was not only instrumental in the original legislation that began the CPMP
 programs; she also recently introduced SB 1266 which was enacted and is now what is called the Alternative Custody Program. This new legislation will allow women to be released early into a community setting on electronic monitoring bracelets.

We have been in contact with her office since the announcement of the closures and her assistant has assured us that Senator Liu is very interested in trying to change legislation to account for changes in the criteria for admission into these programs so that mothers who would still be sent to prison would be afforded the opportunity to participate in these programs. This would definitely be our recommendation based on our findings. As it stands under re-alignment all of the participants that currently qualify for the CPMP will now be sent to county jail instead of prison. If the criteria for admission into the program were able to be changed the population who fall under more serious crimes that will be sent to prison could be afforded the opportunity to be involved in these programs while maintaining the bond with their children. In addition, we also would like to send a letter to the Los Angeles County Sheriff so that he can also see the impact of these programs. Our hope is that the sheriff’s department will see the impact and will consider developing alternative custody programs that will allow female offenders to maintain the bond with their children while completing their prison sentence.

**Conclusion:**

Alternative sentencing programs may offer a solution to address these issues if they are continued as an option for female offenders. The participants in our study definitely were able to confirm the positive aspects of the program as an alternative to jail or prison. Researchers and policy makers have called for gender-responsive treatment programs to address the needs of incarcerated substance abusing women, and they have
emphasized the need for programs focused on women’s statuses as mothers and caregivers. \(^{18}\) Reports from SAMHSA have indicated that women in treatment are less likely than men to relapse and are more likely to participate more fully.\(^ {19}\) Programs that appear to improve treatment outcomes for women are female-only programs and interventions. \(^{20}\) Greenfield and Pirard (2009) proposed that focusing on women’s needs such as history of trauma, co-morbidity, lack family supports, lack of child-care, lack of housing and low income are more likely achieved in female-only interventions or female-only programs. As demonstrated by the participants of this study being afforded the opportunity to be with their children while working on these issues has had a huge affect on how they see the world. In addition, having their children with them provides motivation to participate in treatment and to be more successful.

Addressing the unique patterns of alcohol and drug abuse and the as specific needs found among women are important to developing relevant treatment programs and interventions that will engage the women involved. “Most significant, women inmates are likely to have been custodial parents of their children just before incarceration”\(^ {21}\) which is an important factor to consider when making decisions about sentencing for these offenders. It is clear that “public policy reform will continue to be a challenge for those who are concerned about children whose parents are imprisoned and their


\(^{19}\) Breshears, Yeh, & Young, 2005


caregivers. There is a growing recognition, however, that these children cannot be best
served in isolation from their families and that helping raise the visibility of these issues
will perhaps prevent future generations from being swept into the criminal justice
system.”

There is no question that the criminal justice system that we had in place was
definitely not working but the solutions need to be carefully thought out in consideration
of all those who will be impacted by these reforms. These problems will persist no matter
where they are supervised, county or state; it is all a question of how they will be
addressed going forward. Our study provides evidence that without these programs
mothers and children will be forced to be separated and sent into a jail or prison system
and then released back into a broken family without addressing the issues that led them
there in the first place.

In conclusion, we hope that everyone reads this document understands the need to
continue these services for the families who need them. Our hope is that instead of
closing programs and discontinuing services our state/county officials would consider
allocating funds to create even more effective programs addressing the current service
gaps rather than just eliminating services that are working. Most of all we hope that in all
of the decision making process that the children are not invisible as you deliberate and
decide who will be impacted.

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Reference List:


Www.prototypes.org. Prototypes.
The Honorable Carol Liu  
State Capitol, Room 5061  
Sacramento, CA 95814  

Dear Senator Liu:

The legislation addressing the closure of the Community Prisoner Mother Program, specifically AB109 is of paramount interest to myself and my co-researchers; the participants of the Community Prisoner Mother Program. I have spent the last thirteen years of my career working directly with these participants and I assure you that these services are of paramount importance to the community. We urge you to take action to insure that these programs continue. This issue directly impacts not only the current families that are being served in these programs but it also impacts the viability of future families being able to benefit from these valuable services.

We are primarily concerned about the children that will be impacted by these closures because in most cases these children will be separated once again from their parents and in most cases will be put into an already overburdened child welfare system. Other aspects of this same issue are how it will affect the families that are involved with these offenders and the extra hardships these closures will have on them.

We know that you have been very instrumental in ensuring services such as these for women and children continue. We urge you to read the report that we have sent to you
which demonstrates the impact these programs have had on the participants they are servicing. We will look forward to your reply expressing your opinions, and your current stance on the issue.

Thank you for your consideration of our viewpoint on this matter. We believe that it is an important issue, and would like to see the legislation be enacted to ensure the continuation of these valuable programs.

Sincerely,

April Wilson

845 East Arrow Highway

909 624-1233 ext. 111

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**Evaluation Questions:**

1. What has been your experience of the CPMP program?

2. How has your background contributed to your being sent to prison? Has the program impacted how you look at that?

3. Have there been benefits or challenges that you would like to discuss?

4. Can you tell me a story about one of those benefits or challenges?

5. Has your family benefited from the program? If so how?

6. How has your participation in the program affected the mother-child bond between you and your child?

7. Do you think this program may have an impact on your life after the prison sentence?

8. How do you see these areas of your life: re-entry, career, sense of self, recovery, role as a mother, relationships?

9. How would you envision your prison sentencing being different if you were in a traditional facility and not enrolled in the CPMP program?

10. How might your relationship with your children be different?

11. How might their understanding of motherhood and their role as a mother be different?

    These are speculations but perhaps they have insight that could be illuminating.

12. How do you navigate the world differently as an inmate as oppose to being a mother here?
13. What is one of the specific impacts of CPMP program for you and your family? If they think it has added value, ask them to explain how.

14. What has been the impact of the program on your children?

15. How will the pending closure affect you and your family members?

16. Is there any pertinent information that you would like people to know that relates to the program?