

PRISON WIFE STIGMA: AN EXPLORATION OF STIGMA BY AFFILIATION AND  
STRATEGIC PRESENTATION OF SELF

by

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## **Abstract**

The stigma of prison extends beyond the male prisoner to those who care about him, often his wife. Almost all prisoners will be released back into their communities (Hughes, 2003) and having a solid support network improves successful re-entry experiences and lowers recidivism rates for men who are released from prison (Duwe & Clark, 2013). The stigmatization that prison wives feel because they are married to an inmate, can affect how attached they feel to their community, how comfortable they feel in their workplace, and how accepted they feel by their family and friends. Financial exploitation, challenging prison policies, and visitation procedures oftentimes can make an already difficult situation even more difficult. While the number of men in prison in the United States is slowly declining, the United States remains the world leader in the number of people incarcerated (Travis, et. al., 2014). As this level of incarceration continues to affect such a large number of people (specifically women for this research) in our society, there is reason to consider a more intentional approach to focusing on recognizing the feelings and experiences of prison wives.

This research includes narrative interviews of 35 women who identified as prison wives. The goal of the research was to specifically gather details on their experiences of being a prison wife and how they feel that society judged them based on the stereotype they perceived society to have. My research shows that the interviewees feel stigmatized; however, the awareness of, feelings about, and the reaction toward the stigmatization manifests differently among the two groups of prison wives that I identified: Riders and Stoppers. I have gathered details about how their experiences were often made more challenging as they tried to maintain their relationships in the midst of financial exploitation and challenging prison policies and procedures. I conclude my thesis on the relevancy of their experiences as they relate to the prison-industrial complex in

our society and how this affects their interactions within the communities in which a prisoner's wife, family members, and formerly incarcerated individuals live and work.

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# **Dedication**

To my With.

# Chapter 1 - Introduction, Problem Statement, and Research

## Question

Mass incarceration in the United States has reached epic proportions in costs and its affects on prisoners and their families. “The U.S. penal population of 2.2 million adults is the largest in the world” (Travis, et.al., p. 2)<sup>1</sup> and a total of nearly 7 million are affected when including data for those on parole or probation (Glaze, 2010). Henrichson & Delaney (2012) surveyed 40 states and found that the average cost per inmate averaged around \$30,000 with a range from about \$14,000 to \$60,000 of states reviewed. Prisoners face many challenges and struggles – both during incarceration and after – but they are not the only ones who pay the price of incarceration. While the effects of prison and the experiences of an inmate can be assumed, often what is not considered are the effects on and the experiences of an inmate’s family, and specifically for the purposes of my research, his wife. These effects can include an increased number of obligations and competing demands exacerbated by the carceral environment (Arditti, 2012; Christian et al., 2006). As noted by Grinstead (2001), “For every man who is incarcerated, there are women and children who suffer social, psychological and financial consequences” (p. 1).

As found by Phillips and Gates (2011), the “stigma by affiliation” that is felt by an inmate’s support network is felt particularly by his wife (p. 287). Wives who choose to remain married to or get married to men in prison may experience assumptions and judgments by society. A prison wife may face judgment in her community, in her workplace, and among family and friends. The primary purpose of a prison sentence (for those sentenced to any time

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<sup>1</sup> This number can vary depending on whether county jails are used as prisons for people who have been convicted of a crime.

less than a life sentence) is to punish a person for the crime committed and to prepare that person for what is presumed to be a successful reentry into society at the conclusion of the sentence.

Over 95% of prisoners will be released back into the community (Hughes, 2003). The Bureau of Justice Reform surveyed 30 states in 2005, and of those states surveyed, out of 405,000 inmates who were released, almost 68% of prisoners reoffended within three years of release (Durose et al., 2014). Successful reentry requires connected social and community relationships, and adequate and positive emotional support (Duwe & Clark, 2013). Having assistance and support from a former inmate's community is a social process that can strongly influence his success (Visher, & Travis 2003). However, the level of connectedness of the spouse to the community also influences this process, and the label "prison wife" may be a barrier to creating or maintaining her own strong social bonds within her community. This in turn lessens the connection of her husband to that same community upon his release.

A study in 2009 determined that successful parolees lived with a spouse/significant other in a "mostly good" or "excellent" relationship (Bucklin, 2009). Other research consistently shows that strong family connections correlate with successful reentry (Visher & Travis, p. 101, Christian et. al, 2006). This research also suggests that workshops that focus on marital, family and parenting skills help lead to better reintegration (Visher & Travis, 2003) indicating that actively working on fostering and maintaining successful relationships can lead to positive results.

One's self-perceptions are affected by how other people judge them, and this can affect how successful their interactions are within their society (Thomas & Thomas, 1938). When a person is stigmatized by society, the connection of that person to their society is weakened (Beckett and Harris, 2011; Braithwaite, 1989). As a result, prison wives often seek those who

are accepting of them: fellow prison wives or a small, select group of friends or family who are supportive.

This study focuses on prison wives—women who are either married to or in a long-term relationship with a man in prison. This research explores the following questions: What are the experiences of women who are married to men in prison? How do prison wives perceive themselves and how do they feel perceived by society? If societal judgment exists, how does this affect these women?

## Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Groups who feel stigmatized by society, struggle with “poor psychological health and social functioning” (Moore et. al., 2013). Goffman’s (1963/1986) work on stigma explains that to be stigmatized is to be identified by an attribute that others in the community don’t necessarily possess; the stigmatized person, thus, is “[reduced ...] from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (p. 3). He describes further that those with a stigma are perceived as less than human. The prison stigma in the United States dates back to at least the 18th century when the idea of the prison system shifted from a public punishment to a private punishment that happened behind high walls and barbed wire. At that point in time and in current society, prisons and prisoners became hidden from public view (Foucault, 1977). As indicated by Goffman at the beginning of this paragraph, by hiding prisons and prisoners, they are stigmatized because they are not included in what are the common and normal workings of their society. The prison stigma is due in part to the crime having been committed, but also the hidden nature of the punishment that heightens the stigma of the crime itself. The crime comes with stigma-it is unacceptable as judged by societal laws and norms. In the case of a prisoner who is married, this stigma extends to his wife, as well. She then has a “spoiled identity.” Goffman (1963/1986) explains the spoiled social identity as being one of a discredited person in an unaccepting world.

The stigma that prison wives may feel can be described as shame or falling short of societal expectations, or as an “awareness of inferiority” that [may cause] a fear that others can disrespect a person because of something that he shows [... resulting in being] always insecure in contact with normals [the non-stigmatized group, general society] (Goffman, 1986, p. 13). Goffman explains that those who feel stigma may feel discredited either because their stigma is known or discreditable because they have concealed their stigma and it is unknown (Goffman,

1986, p. 4). Goffman (1963/1986) describes the adaptation that stigmatized groups experience and the moral career (learning process) by which this is done. Some in the stigmatized group will seek “the wise” (those who are sympathetic); some will withdraw and manage information in such a way that they can pass as normal, and others may end up finding solidarity amongst those with a common difference and form a group of support. Each of these adaptations is represented in my research data, as I will describe below.

Recent work in the area of stigma further explains stigma as a process based on “elements of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination co-occur together in a power situation that allows the components of stigma to unfold” (Link & Phelan, 2001). Furthermore, they explain that stigma can either cross independently or overlap three levels within a society: structural, social and self. The laws of a society or policies of a prison (as I will explain later on) affect and restrict behavior are called structural stigma (Corrigan et. al., 2005). Social stigma manifests in how those in a position of power or who otherwise judge another group, and perceived stigma is reflected in how one feels judged by others within their society (Berger, Ferrans, & Lashley, 2001).

The visibility of the stigma is also studied. Some who are stigmatized will not assimilate and will instead put forth effort to hide the stigmatizing aspects of their life in order to protect the differences judged negatively by the normal group (Goffman, 1963/1986). Someone feeling stigmatized can manage the resulting emotions from their stigma being known or they can control what is known in order to try to limit the emotions of stigmatization. Voluntarily disclosing information that may perpetuate society's negative perceptions can directly affect how a prison wife presents herself socially, professionally, or simply as a member of the community. Goffman’s (1959) work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, explains that people are

actors within each social situation and that as actors, their roles can and will change and so will the way they act accordingly. An actor changes the way they present themselves most often “defensively” in order to protect their own interests and to manage their identity in different social situations (Goffman, 1959). An actor’s decision on how to present himself or herself is a reflection of anticipatory stigma, or the anticipation of being judged (Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009). Perspectives of stigma “are generated in social situations with mixed contacts [those who are stigmatized and normal in the same situation, (Goffman, 1986. p. 12] by virtue of application or assumption of unrealized norms” (Goffman, 1986, p. 138). Interestingly, a stigmatized person may also exhibit similar stigmatized prejudices toward others in the same or different situations and this, too, is shown in my research.

Stigmatization is a result of labeling. Becker’s (1963/1991) book *Outsiders* explains labeling theory. According to Becker, we as a society are bound by social rules. Some of these rules are formal and some are informal. When someone breaks the social rules, whether formal or informal, they are likely to be judged by their society. Some less formal social rules are perceived as acceptable if they are broken while other more formal social rules, often laws within the justice system, when broken will bring about harsh societal and legal judgment. By extension, those who affiliate themselves with the rule-breakers, known as the outsiders, also receive some judgment. For example, as the present study will show, wives of men arrested for drug crimes often felt less stigmatized than wives of men who had been charged with a sex crime. While this may not seem surprising on its face, pertinent details of the crime and resulting charges as well as mitigating circumstances that may show a more socially acceptable justification for the crime though these details often remain unknown. Labeling theory does not

address the ambiguities that arise from deviant behavior; what may be acceptable in one instance is not acceptable in another (Becker, 1963/1991).

Outsiders, whether those that have broken the rules or those associated with the rule-breakers, are seen as deviants: those who deviate from what society views as normal and acceptable. “Whether an act is deviant, then, depends on how other people react to it” (Becker, 1991, p. 11). Becker’s theory would seem to apply to prison wives, as well.

The “normal” people in a society are those with some kind of privilege that affords them the position of judgment, often economic or political power that allows them to create, adapt, or enforce the social rules that they use to judge others. Additionally, the social rules that are ultimately enforced end up becoming the rules that typically are easy for the “normal” people to abide by themselves. Often, those who make the rules are doing so for moral justification. According to Becker (1963/1991), these people are the “moral entrepreneurs” within a society. Moral entrepreneurs are focused on a moral crusade to align the actions of society with the actions that match the entrepreneur’s agenda. When the majority creates rules and establishes what is normal and acceptable for society, this ultimately leads to suppression of those who are not normal, those known as the outsiders or the deviants. However, similar social rules that indicate what is acceptable can also originate and then be applied by families and friends of the person who received the initial or most obvious judgment. What is acceptable to a family unit or a particular group of friends may differ slightly from society as a whole, and this can lead to further frustration and feelings of judgment by the person labeled as a deviant (Becker, 1963/1991). For this research, it is often the inmate who is labeled as a deviant, though as my research shows, his wife often feel labeled as a deviant, too.

Symbolic interactionism sets apart humans as social beings who derive their identity both from within themselves and based on how they are received by others. However, this also means that we, as a society, judge other people based on our own experiences and therefore, this judgment is very subjective (Blumer, 1969). Once a person receives a label, society views them as that label and this denies a person's individual story (Garfinkel, 1956). Once a person is reduced to a label, rather than a person with an unique story, this can transform both a person's own identity and their social relationships. Braithwaite (1989) explains that as a result of feeling isolated, those in a stigmatized group will bond together and create their own subculture because society has otherwise excluded them.

Lemert (1951) and Becker (1963/1991) have written extensively on labeling and deviance. Becker says "social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance and by applying those rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders" (p. 9). Thus, being labeled as a deviant can have a profound impact on a person's life. This label defines people and causes them to react based on the difference between how they see themselves and how others see them (Lemert, 1951). This can be seen in the research on women who feel that they are limited by a family member's unawareness of their relationship status, or in their careers if they are limited to jobs that allow schedule flexibility (as needed to meet prison visitation policies), for example.

"Many varieties of deviance create difficulties by failing to mesh with expectations in other areas of life" (Becker, 1991, p. 35). Deviants who have a hard time being accepted by others who are not like them will often become aligned with other deviants of the same type, and a deviant group will form amongst them. Deviant groups often form as a response to a common problem (Becker, 1963/1991). These groups offer solidarity because as group members are

labeled, they feel less a part of mainstream society and want to feel that they are accepted and belong. The idea is that a group of others who are shunned either for the same or different reasons will be more accepting of others who also feel labeled and shunned.

Some examples in the literature indicate resiliency strategies that prison wives use are: to focus on their husband's release and the time that they will be able to spend together when that happens (Fishman, 1990); to take on the stereotypical male roles in the household or attend support groups (Codd, 2000); and to weigh the benefits of maintaining the relationship against the cost of the disappointment shown by those who judge them for doing so. Mills and Codd (2008) describe a strong social expectation that women will meet obligations to family members, and more specifically, that the family members of prisoners have the potential to aid in the prisoner's rehabilitation. Braman (2004) explains that the family has to reorganize itself, including the new head of the household taking on other responsibilities.

Looking at the tremendous growth of mass incarceration in the United States since the 1970s, the reach of the control of the American prison system goes beyond the walls that hold the inmates. Differences in policies and procedures among states lead to varying incarceration rules across our nation (Gottschalk, 2011). Almost every area of our society is becoming affected both by the control of the prison system both for the offenders in its care, but also by the effect it has on them post-release. Affecting democratic processes such as rights to acts of citizenship such as voting rights, employment opportunities and affecting in particular our nations' poorest and minority groups (Gottschalk, 2011). And there is continued incentive for private prison corporations to not move away from high incarceration rates, but rather to increase their bed space based on a steady stream of inmates to fill them. Methods of payment to private prisons are based on contract language that pays based an inmate's sentence release date does not

encourage early release for good behavior, or any incentive to shrink the private prison's population or revise sentencing guidelines that impose mandatory minimums, for example (Gottschalk, 2006). Beyond the cost of imprisonment and the motivation for private prisons, in particular, to work against the prison industrial complex, is the moral obligation. Recognizing with advanced forensic science and technological advancements that America has been responsible for the miscarriages of justice for those who are wrongly incarcerated bodes a moral obligation to re-evaluate the punishment within our justice system (Tonry, 2011).

Growing research indicates that such a large population of people in prison links to broken social networks and lessens social control of families and communities (Clear, 1996). Additional studies by Holt & Miller (1972) show that there is a decrease in "contact from legally married wives of first term inmates" between the first and second year (p. 26), which seems to indicate some deterioration in the relationship. Christian et.al., (2006) found that "families who stay involved with a prisoner may jeopardize their own social and economic capital" to maintain their relationship (p. 451).

As mentioned earlier, this study will show that individuals who are a part of the inmate's social network face consequences related to incarceration. One of the biggest consequences of a woman marrying a man in prison is the stigmatization she feels. Not only does she feel judged differently or feel separated from what is considered to be normal and acceptable by societal standards, she may also feel the residual consequences of exploitation because of how society negatively views prisoners, too. Some of these consequences are: high costs of visitation (food, travel, and lodging), keeping in touch by phone, and structural challenges of getting permission to visit a prisoner or being treated disrespectfully upon visiting which will be discussed in my research.



## Chapter 3 - Methods, Data

This research was exploratory and used standard qualitative research methods to find, gather, and analyze data using semi-structured, narrative interviews of the respondents. Qualitative research methods can be used to explore situations and get details that are based on feelings and emotions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 11). Interviews were used to learn of the perceptions and experiences of women who are married to men in prison in the United States. Questions focused on the experiences of stigma that exist in heterosexual relationships from the perspective of the wife in society who is married to her husband who is in prison. For the purpose of this study, the term “prison wife” references a woman legally married to a man in prison or a woman who is in a long-term committed relationship with a man in prison. I interviewed only women who were at least 18 years old and indicated that they were in long-term committed relationship with a prisoner who was also at least 18 years old. Interviews focused on prison wives’ experiences as the partner of a man in prison. I focused on whether these women feel like they have experienced stigma, and if so how they feel stigmatized, what their experiences have been, and what effect this has on their daily lives.

I interviewed 35 female participants who volunteered via social media. Respondents opted-in to this study and were given the option to quit at any time. I advertised in two online social media groups after requesting permission of the administrators by explaining that I was interested in the experiences of women who were in relationships with men in prison. One social media group was extremely interested in my research and was tremendously helpful: Strong Prison Wives and Families ([www.spwf.com](http://www.spwf.com)).

With those women who chose to be interviewed, I used the snowball sampling technique to ask them if they could refer me to other prison wives whom I could invite to participate as

well. Snowball sampling is a good technique to use when a larger sample of the population is not readily available or practical to access for reasons such as cost or isolation (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997). I found that snowball sampling was key given the general hesitancy of this group. Women were often wary of communicating with me and were concerned about privacy and anonymity and the specific use of the information that I gathered. After the initial round of interviews, women who had been interviewed posted to the group and said that they felt that the interview experience was professional and said that I was a courteous and respectful researcher. This prompted future waves of respondents. Some women referred specific women they knew would be interested. Interviewees indicated that they felt more comfortable talking to me if they had been directly referred by one of their friends. Once I had established myself with one of the site administrators and a few other women, they posted on my behalf, offering validation for my research, and this helped me to gather referrals and further interviewees.

I found that women were cautious and wanted to be reassured that my research was legitimate and that my intentions were professional and genuine. One interviewee commented that she was not interested in participating if I my intention was to show her experience in a negative light or for shock value. For those women who were hesitant to share too many details, once we talked for a little bit, I explained further the scope of my project, and then they were willing to speak (anonymously) about their experiences and the stigma they felt. Additionally, some women were very forthcoming in discussing the details of their husband's crime, though they were never directly asked.

I used a narrative interview style. I asked questions, and the women were given the opportunity to answer and expand on their answers with additional stories or examples to explain their feelings and experiences. They were given the chance to clarify or share additional details

during the questions, and at the end were invited to share further information or related stories that they felt would help me understand their standpoint. When a person tells the story of their experience(s), their narrative serves to help them understand themselves, and how they are defined in the world (Fivush, et. al., 2010). I asked open-ended questions to explore the ways in which these women felt stigmatized because they were married to an inmate. If they did feel stigmatized, I asked them to explain further how this label affected their daily lives. I collected stories of their personal experiences that detailed and justified their feelings. As explained by Presser & Sandberg (2015), a person's story motivates their action and the action of others, (p. 86). Furthermore, a person's story is meaningful based not only on his or her own perspective, but also on the power of how their perspective is judged. This is especially true in the case of "mass harm" or in the instance of elites who spread false propaganda (Presser & Sandberg, p. 86). The idea of those in society judging others negatively or as a deviant follows Becker's labeling theory.

As mentioned earlier, though I intentionally did not ask, many respondents chose to share with me the crime for which their husband was incarcerated, as it often became a natural part of the conversation. Some of their comments suggested that there is a different stigma attached to the women based on the crime that their partner was charged with. Crimes that were drug related and typically non-violent seemed to produce less stigma for the women and, ironically, they all felt more positive about the prison sentence because it meant that their husband was (usually) forced into sobriety. If their partner became sober while in prison then it was often easier to discuss his situation, and her own situation as his wife, with family and friends, as if somehow the drug addiction explained the crime and prison sentence. However, the study participants

were often more guarded in sharing details of crimes that were high profile or of a violent nature, with not only me, but also their presentation of themselves to others in general.

I had hoped for in-person interviews with local participants, but due to scheduling conflicts, all interviews were completed by video chat, telephone, or email. As I became pressed for time, some interviewees completed the questionnaire by email and email/phone follow up. This actually seemed to get more detailed information as the interviewees had more time to consider the question and write their own responses, which was not possible during the alternatively used video interview method. The downside of this method was the inability to get immediate follow-up to their responses, but, if asked, most respondents were quick to provide more detail through email. The other negative aspect to email interviews was that I did not feel as though I connected as strongly with the women as I did through video chat. These drawbacks notwithstanding, I would recommend email for additional research on this topic, with the opportunity for follow-up phone calls or in-person meetings for anyone hesitant about written communication to gather specific follow up details.

Initially, I had a hard time getting to the point of the actual interview after the women had indicated their interest. As I sought ways to increase participation, I began sending participants reminders of the interview time and information in advance on how to download Zoom (the video communication software that I used). Additional reminders did increase participation; however, I still had only about a 25% participation rate based on initial responses. Whenever I solicited interviewees, I got a handful of responses. About 50% of those became scheduled interviews, and about 50% of those became completed interviews. I believe that the nature of the topic combined with time zone differences and scheduling conflicts, often due to last minute changes to phone call or visit schedules with their husbands, presented obstacles to completing

interviews. A couple of women backed out at the last minute. Based on hesitancy that they shared previously, I assumed that their last minute hesitancy to the nature of the interview and the by-product of the stigma that was studied. It was extremely important to all participants that I protect their confidentiality and was a respectful researcher. Therefore, it was important for me to convey professionalism and empathy for study participants, thereby achieving status as a reputable researcher, which in turn helped to obtain future interview participants.

From the start of my research to the completion of interviews, some women had partners who were released from prison. I interviewed some women that had responded as married to an inmate, but ultimately he was released by the time of my interview. Because they initially met the criteria of my research, their information is included as they, too, had definite experiences with stigma that often carried over to their lives post-release.

I used supportive language that did not in any way belittle or judge the experiences of the women interviewed. Because of both the feelings of stigmatization and concern for privacy due to legal concerns with their husbands' cases, participants were often hesitant to share personal details about their experiences. However, with anonymity guaranteed, women shared more easily. Several women expressed comfort and even relief in speaking of their relationship to someone who was not interested in judging their lifestyle. In order to obtain the most truthful and accurate data from the women's narratives, all confidentiality was routinely assured (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997). Respondents' personal details that may have been divulged during the interviews, including legal and personal issues, social media group interactions, interview notes, and responses are relayed in this research in a completely anonymous way. Pseudonyms are used to represent all women interviewed in the study as well as anyone that they mentioned during the course of the interview, including their incarcerated partner. Specific identifying

details that do not change the outcome of the study have been changed to further protect the stories of these women.

An additional hurdle to my research was the assumption of truthfulness. As indicated above, there were barriers to research because the families of prisoners are generally a part of a marginalized class who can often be disproportionately affected by the judicial system. The more sensitive the topic being studied, the more likely potential research participants are to withhold details about their experiences (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997). Response details may be altered or may not be entirely forthcoming since “a person’s narrative presupposes a moral self in the narrating process” (Linde, 1993, p. 123). However, in my discussions with the women, they shared details about their lives and their husband’s experiences that they were not always proud of. The wives were not ashamed, but admittedly gave what could easily be construed as negative details about their lives. Because women appeared to be honest with me with details for which I *could* have negatively judged them for (but I did not), I believe that as far as I could be aware, they were factual in the information and experiences that they relayed during the interviews.

Early on, one woman asked if she could send a picture of her with her husband and asked if I could include it in my thesis. I had not previously intended to do so, but adding pictures (with participant permission and proper photo credit given) seemed to be a good way to humanize the women and to normalize their experiences. For many, their pictures from visits were prized possessions since often time they had no other material representation of the relationship, so I invited those who were interested in doing to share their pictures to be included and published in the thesis. I received their permission to publish them and gave credit for the

photography (often just the Department of Corrections (DOC) facility as usually it was an inmate employee of the facility who took the photo).

I manually coded the interviews to be able to identify “the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon” (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 63). As I expected, the women’s narratives included examples of how they felt stigmatized at work, in their community, with their friends and family, and by society in general. There were some inconsistent results mostly based on the perspectives of the women. Though all participants indicated that they have felt or experienced stigma, often they didn’t classify it as negative because they were very confident of their choices and decisions and did not consider their thoughts as stigmatizing. Others, while they had an awareness of the stigma they felt, they did not let it otherwise inhibit their choices so therefore were reluctant to label it as such. These women, in particular those who did not outwardly identify as stigmatized, were more likely to speak openly during interviews and were completely transparent about their relationship. They seemed to shoulder what other wives often considered very negative experiences or feelings that came with being open about their relationship as routine and it did not cause these prison wives to feel negatively about their choice to marry a man in prison. I concluded after analyzing the data that the more confident a woman was in her choice to commit to a man in prison, the less she felt the stigma attached to it; however with further conversation, these women would readily admit that it still existed. It simply didn’t bother them as much as it might bother others, but was not any less prevalent to me as a researcher.

After coding the data, and based on the analysis of the narratives, I found the following themes that exhibited the stigma and experiences of prison wives: Perception of Stereotype, Presentation and Stigma, Effects of Stigma, and Financial Exploitation. “Thematic analysis is a

method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 6). A theme was identified based on the number of responses, the degree to which the experience impacted a woman’s life, or the result of how well the response captured an important element of the research topic. I reviewed the data throughout the process of this research, which consisted of obtaining interviews, analyzing data, and writing the final manuscript. Lastly, I recorded in writing the details of the results in a way that respectfully, professionally, and accurately conveyed the experiences of the women interviewed. I did not, in my interviews or in this thesis, analyze the crimes committed or the legitimacy of the verdict(s) of the men involved.

Because my interviewees are not a random sample, the results of this study are not generalizable, are representative of this sample group and may or may not be found to relate to a larger population with further study.

### **Entry into the Research**

I am employed full time, taking graduate level coursework at nearly full-time status, and I am a single mother of two children, one who is in college and one in elementary school. I am an educated, self-aware and confident woman and a prison wife who only recently was able to outwardly identify as such due to issues of stigmatization that I know to exist.

I have felt the stigma just as the other prison wives have described. I find myself monitoring my own presentation of self regularly depending on the situation. I often guard the details of my relationship not only to defer questions, but also the judgment I’ve previously experienced. This makes things harder for me that I do not feel that I can be open about my unique situation in instances where my many identities overlap. One of the most surprising experiences of stigmatization I have had was when a county clerk refused to issue my husband and I a marriage license based solely on her own disagreement that we should be able to marry

because he was in prison. This was despite there being nothing legally that supported her resistance and despite my ability to produce all necessary documentation. She told me very clearly that “those people just lose their rights...he shouldn’t have gotten into trouble,” and she hung up on me. She argued that as he was not counted in the county census, he wasn’t a legal state resident, but if he could appear in person (which was obviously impossible) or if I could produce his driver’s license (also impossible, inmates cannot possess state issued identification and even if this was available, it was long since expired) she would consider our application. All inmates in his state are listed on a publically verifiable website and believe me, had there be any question of whether or not he was officially residing specifically at the facility he was to be housed at, the marriage license would have been the least of our worries. She, an elected public official, then refused my calls, and was just as rude to the minister who was to marry us and the local prisoner advocacy group who was trying to help us obtain our marriage license. The situation of my then fiancé being in prison, and in another state was hard enough, but to have to argue and defend our choice to marry in what was already a stressful situation made her actions even more discouraging. I was judged completely on the basis of my decision to marry an inmate and deemed unworthy of a marriage license because of my choice to do so. But, it was not just at the county level. I made many calls to local corrections and state offices that were ignored; it was truly disheartening. It took months to finally draw attention to my issue at the state level. The attorney in the state office acted appalled and very apologetic, but otherwise referred be back to the county level. My now husband was ultimately transferred to a prison in a different county before the situation was resolved with further legal recourse. The new county who issued our license without issue was professional and courteous and we were finally married a year and a half later.

One of the other biggest ways in which I feel that I am treated as “less than” is when I go to visit my husband. I am limited, or if I go with multiple people, we are all limited as a group to one trip to the restroom regardless of whether or not the visit time is for a few hours or during the weekend when visits are nearly 12 hours. The facility will explain that this helps them to control contraband from being taken into the visitation room, but I and other visitors argue that it is a training issue that could easily be addressed by careful searching at the point at which guests are patted down after returning from the restroom, just like when visitors are initially screened at the start of the visit period. While some people are usually minimally affected by this policy, other people who are elderly, have medical issues or have children in their group suffer greatly by either ending a visit early if they need to use the restroom multiple times or by utilizing the few and finite monthly allotted visits an inmate receives in order to use the restroom an additional time beyond what policy allows. During a recent visit, I saw two children who seemed to be well above the age of being toilet trained, but yet they were wearing diapers that I could see just above the waistband of their pants. The following story explained that this was an apparent adaptation in order to allow them to visit their (assumed) father who was an inmate there. As one group was sitting near us, it was easy to hear as one of the children explained to her mother that she “didn’t want to potty in her diaper”. Ultimately her mother insisted there wasn’t an option having already utilized the only restroom break allowed for that visit. I am not judging the merits of the situation from the mother’s point of view; however, I am using this example to point out the way in which the structural policies make it more difficult for visitations, which as I’ll describe below, are a very important part of a successful reentry experience.

These experiences, which are not unique, as I will later describe, stand out and remind me that I was treated as less than for desiring to marry my now husband, who is an inmate, and that

children and those who care and are able to do so, visit knowing that they must control their body's natural functions for urination and defecation in a way that goes against human nature because the prison chooses not to address their current and substandard restroom policy.

Unfortunately, there are many other experiences that have made me aware that the stigma I felt was real and as this led me to wonder about the experiences of others and to wonder why I was even made to feel this way by society. I wondered why the stories of my experiences, interactions, and feelings, became judged as less than once the word "prison" or "inmate" was introduced when it concerned my husband. And, I wondered if it was just me that experienced these feelings of judgment.

During the interviews the women did not know that I shared many of their experiences. This allowed the interviews to be authentic and allowed the participants to answer genuinely and to speak freely, which may have been hindered otherwise. The interviewees spoke as they would have to any researcher without the assumption that somehow I understood or that they didn't need to fully explain their feelings and experiences that are described later in my research.

## Chapter 4 - Findings

During the participant interviews, there was combination of apprehension and excitement as the women shared their experiences, thoughts, and opinions. They were as guarded as I expected them to be, but they were also glad to have a respectful ear to discuss their feelings and experiences with. At first it was difficult to identify stigma. Some women said directly that they did not feel as though they were treated any differently than women married to non-imprisoned men. However, as we continued the interview, their answers revealed coping skills and included descriptions of changes in presentation of self designed to deflect judgment, even if they did not describe it as such specifically.

The women explained how societal judgment affected how they portrayed their relationships and how these judgments affected how comfortable they felt as members of society and throughout the many roles that they filled in their day to day lives. They told stories that showed why they felt judged based on either how they were treated directly or how they felt they were treated indirectly, by friends, family, and co-workers, or during interactions with prisons and affiliated agencies and vendors. The experiences of the participants point to many commonalities: loneliness, inner strength, and confidence in their choice to marry a man in prison and to take on this lifestyle. The prison wives all explained that they often reacted and coped with the stigma they felt by staying to themselves. Often this was a joint by-product of being so busy with extra jobs, children to care for and other adaptive ways to keep busy on purpose to make the time pass.

Creating an alliance with a network of other prison wives was one of the most common ways for these women to cope with the stigma they felt. This sample of women was very diverse and often the only thing they had in common was their identification as a prison wife. The

women interviewed came from all socioeconomic classes. Most were adjusting to either a single income lifestyle or a lifestyle with expenditures previously not included as wives took on supporting their husbands in prison. Most were struggling as single parents to financially juggle the needs of the outside world, the responsibilities of children, full time work (if they were lucky enough to have this opportunity and the child care often required to maintain it), a household, and the financial and emotional needs of their husbands. Many still had astronomical legal costs or were facing them in the near future, as appeal opportunities might become available.

Membership in a dedicated social media group specifically designed to support those women who were supporting their partner in prison allowed women a safe place to discuss their common feelings and experiences that came with this type of relationship. Very often, meaningful and supportive friendships developed between women who travelled to see their husbands. When travelling, they would often meet up with other local prison wives. As a result, they helped each other with shared rides to visit prisons or by offering a couch to sleep on to help with visit-related costs. This continued to strengthen the bond between this often-isolated group of women.

Through their social media group, prison wives often expressed emotions of loneliness and isolation. Only with other prison wives did they report that they felt fully free to express their emotions because other members of the group could so readily empathize. The social media group also offered a family environment of support for the day-to-day struggles that are unique to these women. Prison wives felt allowed to vent about negative situations that might include unsupportive families, or single parent struggles and experiences that are unique to prison wives. By identifying with the group as a prison wife, women were automatically afforded some level of respect and in-group acceptance, which is not often found in what prison wives might

otherwise consider a judgmental society. At the same time, if within the group, a prison wife was found to be dishonest or otherwise embarrassing to the prison wife label, she would be quickly shunned. This might be because a woman was disrespectful of other women, had broken understood rules of anonymity, or used information discussed in the group to create trouble “behind the walls” by relaying information from the group to an inmate. Many prison wives referred to this group as a sisterhood and this was said repeatedly in the interview. There is a very unique bond between prison wives, especially, but it also seemed to extend to their stories of supportive friends or family members who had unfortunately been involved with the corrections system. In reviewing the interviews and understanding the commonalities of the prison wife label, I realized there were distinct differences within the women of the group, as well.

### **Riders and Stoppers**

Among the interviewees, I came to identify two categories of prison wives: Riders and Stoppers. Generally, the determining factors were the remaining time of the inmate's sentence and the degree to which the wife outwardly acknowledged the situation of having her husband in prison which often aligned with the amount of time they had been together as a couple since he had been incarcerated. The common stigma felt did not change between the two groups, but the degree to which women allowed it to affect them often did.

Of course not every woman fit exactly into one category or the other; however, interview responses more closely aligned a prison wife more with one group than another. And, it is very important to note that the groups do not rank hierarchically. The women in each group were equally as brave, their struggles were all relative and no less important or difficult than the other group's struggles; however, their categorization into one group or the other instead referred to

the way that each group felt the stigma of being a prison wife and also served to reference their common like experiences within the subgroup.

The groups Riders and Stoppers refer to behaviors of passengers of a city or interstate bus ride. When a person is on the bus for a long ride, across many states for example, they tend to settle in and are aware of the inevitable delays and they pace their emotions accordingly. By contrast, a person on a short bus ride, maybe just across the city to see a friend or to run an errand, is usually less likely to get comfortable and can expend more energy getting excited or anticipating their final stop because it is coming up more quickly.

Riders were the women whose husbands had longer sentences or intricate situations that required a slow and steady approach to how they managed their energy and their presentation as a prison wife. They were more often legally married, had concrete plans to marry, or a well established commitment to marry soon. These women were formally committed to their partner regardless of consequence, often including very negative effects from their choice, such as their family disowning them. They often had been with their husband for a lengthy part of his sentence or had committed to a very long sentence term including life or multiple life sentences. Usually Riders had known their partner before he went to prison. Most interestingly, Riders often professed to not feel stigmatized even though their answers and experiences indicated adaptation to societal expectations. The difference seemed to be that this group of women was more used to society's negative responses and simply did not let it affect them as deeply. They were generally older by age, confident in their lifestyle, and were not going to be deterred by negative consequences because of their choice. It is also interesting to note that because of the length of the longer sentences and often the more severe charges that could further isolate Riders, they tended to have a relationship built over many years. This often created a sub group within a

group that consisted of Riders who had known each other, as well as their partner, as a cohort over many years.

Stoppers were the women who usually were new to the relationship; perhaps they had been with their partner for only a short time of his sentence or faced only a short sentence in comparison to the Riders. They more often had met their husband after he was already incarcerated. They were usually not as forthcoming about their partner being in prison for any number of reasons, but often because he would be released in the next couple of years and they wanted for him to have a clean slate upon his release. Some women chose to share less about their relationship because it was relatively new and they themselves were still grasping to embrace all of the many nuances of the relationship and were not able to articulate the many emotions outwardly just yet. Even though it was frequent that the couple had formally committed to each other in some way (plans to be engaged, were engaged, or, less often were married), there was still so much unknown. Women new to the commitment or lifestyle often have yet to experience all of the many intricacies that come with this type of relationship. They were still settling in and becoming familiar with the results, both good and bad, of their relationship choice. It was very common that although the couple was not legally married, they identified as such and this was acceptable to other prison wives again referencing the sisterhood mentality. Most often this was a identification with a status that simplified discussions with like-minded people but as one woman explained, it also legitimized her relationship to others and she didn't feel as though she had to do as much explaining if she talked about her "husband" rather than her "boyfriend" or "friend". Stoppers were more aware of the stigmatization from their relationship and spoke more often about it in interviews with me; however, they were more secretive and reluctant to discuss their partner openly. They often had a story that they told to

explain their husband's absence. Rarely did they lie, but they often would explain the situation in a way that stretched the truth. More often, Stoppers' families (including their children) did not know that their husband was in prison. One woman explained that her husband worked in the oil field so was away much of the time, "Sometimes I will just tell people that he's out of town working if I don't know how they'll react, if they'll be supportive or not." Another wife explained that her husband was taking classes out of state, which was in fact true. One wife explained, "I used to be honest, but I got so many negative responses so now I just tell people he works out of town."

Mostly, Stoppers were committed, but typically not ready to marry. Even though they identified as being in a long-term commitment, the reasons for not being married were not unique to this group. Some reasons for not being married could have been structural and not necessarily unique to the Stoppers: the prison would not let them marry based on prison policy or the couple could be separated across states so ability to travel could be a hang-up as witnesses are required for prison marriages, as well. Some women turned to other prison wives and local women would attend as a witness in order to make the ceremony possible. Stoppers were younger in age compared to Riders and sometimes this factored into their decision to not be married yet. A few indicated that while they loved and were committed to their partner, they were unsure of what the future held because they were worried about how things would be pending further legal sentencing, what might happen when he was released, current difficulties within the relationship, or the fact that the relationship, though committed, was relatively new.

The experiences of negativity, isolation, and loneliness, as well as the unique need for inner strength to counter these negative feelings, prevailed across both groups. What was different was the level of support and the avenues from which that support could come between

them. Because more Stoppers were not completely open, this usually meant that their families and friends were unaware of the level of support needed. Or if family and friends were aware, they did not provide support and were actually outwardly negative about the relationship. Because of the shorter sentences of the Stoppers, it is completely understandable that the Stoppers often had a harder time focusing on the bigger picture and were often more routinely outspoken about his absence from their life and more often spoke comparatively about the emotional and physical differences between “normal” or non-inmate relationships. The shorter sentence generally faced by Stoppers’ husbands also often left less time for both the woman and the inmate to prepare for the transition of the relationship from one in which the man was in prison to one in which the man was released, so Stoppers tended to have a harder time settling into a prison relationship.

Stoppers had a special concern that Riders may not have had for many years or at all. Having a partner who is released comes with its own set of difficulties and concerns because of the pitfalls of being married to a man on parole. While men on parole are not in prison anymore, they are often released contingent on compliance with challenging requirements and guidelines. The challenges of regular check-ins, surprise visits, and having a home approved for parole add additional pressures that Riders do not often have or at least as early on in the relationship.

The groups differed also in their daily outlook. Stoppers focused on short-term struggles of day-to-day absences of their partner – for example, that he was not there to comfort them or help with the chores and the household responsibilities. In comparison, the Riders had settled in and accepted what was described as a type of constant loneliness that was rarely outwardly mentioned because it was so matter of fact. While all prison wives always felt this constant inner loneliness, this had become a blended part of their lifestyle choice and did not typically consume

a Rider's day-to-day life. This feeling was just ever present and part of the norm. There was not the same level of discussion about wishing he was there day to day (though that was ever-present), and they referenced more often the short-term plan. As one woman indicated,

“If I stop long enough to pay attention to the fact that he will never be home, that we will never be together outside of prison, then I would be tempted to give up. I mean, I wouldn't give up on him, but I'd just give up and lose my own strength and he needs that as much as I do. Those thoughts hurt too much, it's such a long sentence.”

Riders, however, seemed to be settled into these emotions and rather than being in the forefront of their thoughts, they were feelings of which they were constantly aware but that consumed less of their daily lives. Riders maintained a level of hope that anything could and might happen that would allow them to be together despite facing a much longer sentence, or even one or more life sentences, than most Stoppers faced.

The attitude of a Rider who was married explained the empowering support that prison wives share and offer to each other:

“We have an obligation to live beyond the stereotype, to defy the stigma and we hold our guys to the same standard. What good does it do anyone if I don't support him and he goes back in—this would support the negativity. This is a sisterhood of support, we keep our husbands going and we keep each other going.”

Prison wives have an incredible bond. Kaitlyn said,

“If you’re a prison wife, I expect you to make good choices and to defy the stigma. It’s a sisterhood, and we have to give each other realness because sometimes it’s hard to be real.”

Stoppers followed one of a few paths. Either they got off the ride for good because the relationship ended, he was released after a relatively short time, or if the sentence was an extended one, this Stopper settled in and became a Rider. The definitive point at which the relationship had cycled through most of the common experiences of being with a man in prison (namely one or more experiences with what is usually routine, but abnormally difficult to get used to segregation and lock-downs), usually happened after about 2-3 years, then the lifestyle became the woman’s new normal and she took on the attitude of a Rider---often without conscious effort it seemed. With this identification came an acceptance of the lifestyle she was committed to living until he was released.

One woman, who I identified as a Rider, told me of her attitude about her relationship:

“It is what it is; I hope you respect my choice, but if not, I’m sorry. This is my life and I’m happy with him, perhaps not the situation, but with him.”

Though less likely, Stoppers could also become Riders if they were committed to a man who had been released and reoffended and received an additional sentence that required her to identify differently. These women had often seen the entire process of being arrested, charged, released, and ultimately resentenced, which gave them an unfortunate advantage to being able to deal with the situation much more routinely than a Rider.

Stoppers and Riders also differed in their disclosure of their prison wife status. Following Goffman's (1959) presentation of self theory (discussed below), Riders carefully managed their identity based on the situation in which they were interacting. They would sum up a situation and determine on the spot if they were going to share further details about their non-traditional relationship. This ability came from having experienced many types of interactions with people and honing their skills to determine what and how much they should share in most any situation. This ability to know what to say had come usually from often saying the "wrong thing" and wishing they hadn't or had said something different. This shows that the women were open enough to try out different approaches and ultimately to come up with what worked for their comfort level: being prepared to explain or not, based on their intuition about any given scenario and based on how previous scenarios had gone. Riders, though, seemed to be either very guarded, telling only select people and perhaps not even close friends or family out of concern for either backlash or negative judgment.

Stoppers may fear the result of their disclosure, whereas Riders may know full well (or think they know) what the result will be and really just don't want to deal with the reaction. This was part of their coping: they did not worry as much about what someone said, they just did not want to expend the energy to explain their choices because they were ok with someone not being supportive. Also, as Riders experience a different type of commitment, either legally or by time together in the relationship; there was very little option for changing their mind about their commitment or ability to prolong the inevitable situation of someone learning of their status. That is not to say that all Riders were completely open because of the inevitability that their truth would be told. Instead, the point is that if Riders shared their story intentionally, they were

prepared for any negative backlash due to experiences of such in the past. One woman said, when I asked if she told new people about her husband:

“It’s not the first thing on my mind when I meet new people, it just is what it is, then later I might realize I didn’t even mention it. I don’t have to show it [the relationship] or him off, he’s just my husband---do you identify where your husband is as soon as you meet a new person?”

On the other hand, most women who were in relationships with men with short sentences (1-2 years) did not disclose their situation as easily or as often as the Riders. Many Stoppers were still testing out stories, developing alternative explanations, or trying to hide the most specific details of their relationship because they were still adjusting to the pressures and judgments of these very difficult relationships. If they did share their story in this process, it was often flippant in nature. Stoppers also might be more guarded of their relationship details because their partner was expected home after a relatively short sentence, and therefore there was not the same pressure to uphold the alternate presentation, that he was not in prison, for as long.

Oftentimes structural circumstances and timing were big hurdles for prison relationships. I identified a woman, Katy, a young college student, as a Stopper. From the time we interviewed to the end of my research, she and her boyfriend had decided to end the ride. She was heartbroken; she cared for her boyfriend very much. She said that his love for her was strong and that he realized that he was holding her back. Before the relationship ended she said,

“I am working toward becoming a preacher, I’ve always wanted to work in the church. A pastor at my church indicated that my relationship with [my boyfriend] was going to be an issue because people would assume that I have poor decision-making skills since I

chose to be with him after he got arrested. This changed the future plans I'd had from my childhood."

She explained her thoughts and feelings about such a difficult commitment.

"As a college student, I should be out with my friends, but I stay in to take his calls or miss activities on the weekend because of visits. I schedule my homework around calls and visits. I choose to do this; I don't feel like I'm missing out, but I know that I need to also be enjoying my college years, too, so I get torn."

She also explained how she felt judged about her choice to be with him.

"My issues in life, which are like everyone else's suddenly, become his fault. I'm young and since I'm not sure about my future plans, people think it's silly that I want to 'limit' myself by being closer to him and moving near him for work when I'm done with school."

She went on to explain that the mechanics of this type of relationship made it more challenging, too.

"He has to conform to my life. I can't call him, he has to fit into my schedule and he does, but it's difficult...and expensive."

When I followed up with Katy some months later she explained that they still hadn't gotten back together, but that she believed their love would remain and they would be able to reconnect in the future.

Identification as either a Rider or Stopper does not in any way lessen these women's commitment to their relationship or the fact that they experienced the results of stigma and stereotypes but serves to determine how they cope with managing their identity in order to deal

with the results of a judgmental society which already has a predetermined idea and stereotype in mind as to what kind of a person a prison wife is.

### **Perceptions of Stereotype**

All of the women interviewed were aware of the negative stereotype that they felt society applied to them. How the women felt judged by friends, family, community members, or co-workers impacted how they presented themselves. One of the questions I asked the women was “How do you think society perceives prison wives?” In summary, the women thought that society assumed that prison wives were not educated, that the women were being taken advantage of by the men in prison, and that prison wives had low self esteem.

Several interviewees said that they themselves had similar negative views of prison wives prior to becoming one. It was interesting to realize that some of the women had actually stereotyped prison wives before being a prison wife; presumably perpetuating the stigma without realizing it could eventually affect them. Others commented that they never thought it possible that they would come to identify as a prison wife so they had never really thought much about their opinions of the lifestyle prior to becoming a part of it. Another stereotype that the women perceived was that they, or their husbands, were not faithful in their commitment. The prison wives did not speak of any difficulties in being faithful. In fact, to the opposite, the women were clear that they were faithful to their husband, and while the relationship did not allow for physical intimacy, they were not interested in a physical relationship with another man as a substitute.

Almost all of the women interviewed had some level of education beyond a high school diploma or GED. And while many of the men did not have even a high school education, almost all of them had achieved some level of additional formal education in prison, whether it was

earning their GED or completing some college coursework. While a GED is usually a standard program for most men in prison, the ability to take college classes is often more difficult and usually indicates that the men had made effort to be eligible for classes and to follow through with them.

Debbie said,

"I think society thinks that (we) can't be intelligent, that we have to have low self-esteem, that we are bottom of the barrel. But, let me tell you, I'm college-educated, I don't do drugs, and I've always held a job. Knowing this, as soon as I say to someone that my husband is in prison, I know they're going to be shocked because I don't fit the stereotype."

Rory said that before her fiancé went to prison, she assumed that women who were with men in prison were just waiting for nothing: they (the inmates) had to be no-good guys to begin with so what could they offer? She also didn't believe that a relationship could work without physical contact between people. Jamie agreed: "I get it; I understand how they can see us like they do, as uneducated or gullible. I used to think that, too. Now I get it, but I don't agree with it."

Susan will be marrying a man who is finishing up the last three years of his sentence. He committed his crime and was tried locally so she explained that she feels like she always has to defend him as well as her own choice to marry him because everyone thinks they know the situation and judge him based on the crime. She says, "I always feel like I have to tell people what a good person he is."

Women indicated that there were some positive aspects of being a prison wife. Most often mentioned was the level of communication required for this type of relationship. Effective

communication is paramount to any relationship, romantic or otherwise, but when a couple's communication is restricted by frequency and method, it makes it even more difficult. Structural and financial limitations required these married couples to not only be effective in their communication, but also efficient. Interviewees all spoke proudly of their ability to communicate deeply and effectively with their husbands within a very short timeframe. One wife said, "I'm sure we communicate way better in our marriage than most of the people [who are] judging us do in theirs. I know... I was married before, we took for granted the ability to communicate and didn't do it well." The list of positive aspects of a prison relationship stopped soon after strong and effective communication. But another aspect mentioned was honesty and commitment that the women described not having before in non-prison relationships.

Lexie said that she felt more comfortable visiting her husband behind barbed wire than in most other social settings because of the lack of judgment. Valerie admits,

"I used to be one of those people that thought only the bad guys went to prison, like, the really bad guys and I assumed then that the women who chose to be in those relationships must not have a clue. But now I realize that prison is the punishment, there shouldn't be additional abuse, too. Not only are the inmates treated poorly, but their family, friends and especially wives are often treated badly, too, because of a stereotype that's not even accurate!"

Prison wives were aware of the stereotypes applied to them. My interviews revealed that in this sample group, many aspects of the stereotype were unfounded. Bailey said she told a friend about her fiancé. Her friend responded that he wouldn't have thought that a pretty girl like Bailey would date a man in prison; he expected that it was only the big, fat girls that would settle for those guys.

It isn't just the wives that feel judged by society; often times their parents are affected, too. During the interviews, I came across a parent who was completely supportive of his daughter's relationship with a man in prison. Because of this unique angle of total supportiveness, I chose to speak with him further though he did not meet my intended interview criteria and was not otherwise included in my data. He was a former correction's officer himself, and he understood that not all men in prison were bad guys. He and his wife chose to support their daughter and he said to me quite plainly, "Why not? If he makes her happy and this is what she chooses, why wouldn't I support her any differently than any other man she was with? The issue isn't that he's in prison, but rather how he treats her and I've gotten to know him, he treats her well." Her father maintains a relationship with her fiancé and he and his wife accept him as part of their family. He commented that while he might wish for her an easier path, he wouldn't deny her happiness regardless. Based on his personal interest and knowledge of the flaws of our justice and prison system, he is involved in other advocacy groups and outreach projects.

Prison wives manage the stigma they feel in order to lessen the impact of negative judgment or to them cope with the difficulties of a situation. How they present themselves based on the stigma they feel varies among this group of women.

### **Presentation and Stigma**

Over and over again the women mentioned that they were guarded and intentional with what they share about their prison wife status, often quickly assessing the context of the situation and the person with whom they are interacting in order to determine the worthiness of disclosing their identity. Goffman (1959) explained this as Presentation of Self – the idea that individuals portray themselves in a way that will be received positively by others. How someone portrays

himself or herself can be intentional or unintentional, and their portrayal (performance) can change from one situation to another.

In some way, each of the women explained that they changed their presentation to avoid the results of stigma. For some women the stigma was less bothersome than it was for others, but they all described a level of adapting the explanation of their relationship to better conform to the expectations of society. Most of the women made some type of excuse for the mysteries of their lifestyle, they all restricted the information given, and only a few were completely honest about their husband being a prisoner. Many women had chosen to not tell their families or to come up with an alternative story that skirted the truth. Several women were concerned about legal and custody issues related to minor children, because given the stereotype in our society, they feared that if the truth were to come out their custody or ability to be a good parent could be questioned just based on their choice to marry a man in prison. It took a lot of emotional and mental labor to manage the information they shared and to keep track of what they shared, how they shared it and with whom. But the management of their identity also took a toll personally; the women reported feeling isolated, alone, and separated from society.

None of the women felt ashamed of their relationship; rather, they were protective of their feelings, the feelings of their partner, and any children or other family members who might be affected by negative and inaccurate judgments. The women did not want to set themselves up for what they often felt would be ridicule or judgment. Goffman (1959) explains that when people put themselves into a social situation, they project what they wish to portray. If this concept does not match what the social situation expects, then embarrassment and other negative emotions can result. The prison wives who participated in this study often have experienced the

embarrassment that came from sharing their story only to realize that the other person was condemning or judgmental.

Bailey said that the worst reaction she had experienced so far came from her own father who was unfortunately very negative, asking her, “Are you being stupid on purpose?” He then insinuated that her husband wouldn’t be faithful or stick around once he was out. “I’m either upfront or I change the subject,” she told me. Another woman told me that her stepfather just calls her fiancé, the father of her two teenage children, names and tries to convince her that her fiancé is writing other women.

In order to avoid lying, most women had a story prepared in case questions got uncomfortable, and usually the stories were rooted in some version of the truth, though the answers were purposely veiled to deflect further discussion or to present as normal so as to not arouse suspicion. Stories explaining that their husband worked a lot, that he worked out of state or that he was taking classes out of state at college, seemed to put curiosity at bay.

In sidestepping the conversation, prison wives take on a new burden, the question of what will come of someone’s view of them if the truth comes out. Goffman (1959) explains that false impressions can lead to the suspicion that someone is concealing details in other parts of their life, too. But, given the choice of being judged negatively for sharing their status as a prison wife, women generally choose to conceal their “spoiled identity” and process the situation of being caught being less than forthcoming later on, if it occurred.

One Rider found her approach to sharing her story, saying, “I know my audience. I can read those who may respond with empathy and then I may share a little more with them. But there are those I know better than to set myself up for judgment.” Along these lines, another

wife said clearly, “It’s my story to tell, on my terms, when I’m ready. But, it’s a shame that I have to be so guarded.”

Most women did not tell their families all of the details. And it was common that if a woman’s family was not supportive, that her husband’s family was supportive. Lexie indicated that she has no family support at all, in fact, when she told her family about her partner going to prison for just short of 3 years, things got so bad between them that she had to move away.

Jamie tells people that he's out of town working. She feels very judged by her mother's side of the family, but is open with her friends and some of her co-workers. She has learned to have this story ready because in the past when she has been honest about his whereabouts, she's been told that "he must have deserved it", or "he's obviously there for a reason", as if to imply that he is less than a person. Jamie says, “I cannot condone what he did, but I defend standing by him, I didn’t commit his crime.” Alternatively, Kaitlyn is not worried about what other people think. “I’ll tell anyone: he made a mistake, some get caught and some don’t.”

Sydney described the worst reaction she experienced when she told a friend about her husband being in prison. Her friend told Debbie that she was mentally unstable and should get counseling. They no longer speak. “I remember when I told a friend about him. She told me that I was mentally unstable and needed counseling. So, I won’t do that again, this is hard enough as it is, I’d rather just not have any support than negative support.”

Valerie said she chooses not to tell anyone about her fiancé (they plan to marry when he's out in a couple of years), but it is not because she perceived that she would be judged negatively. It is more to protect his freedom from judgment. She does not want anyone to have a preconceived notion of him that would prevent him from a fresh start upon release.

Several prison wives spoke against what they perceived as a misconception of their relationships. They thought that maybe others viewed their lifestyle as one that was chosen for some type of excitement or attention. However, none of the women that I interviewed chose this lifestyle on purpose; in fact, it was just the opposite. This included the women who had started their relationship as a pen pal to an inmate never thinking or intending that they would fall in love or commit to a relationship with their writing partner. Some women acknowledged that the stereotype could be true, that there are women who choose this lifestyle for what they think is excitement or will guarantee a faithful man who has nothing to focus on but her, but the women who were motivated by the presumed excitement of a prison relationship did not stay committed to the difficult lifestyle for very long, as reported by prison wives who had known this rare situation to occur. As I explained earlier, women who had relationships that ended after a short period of time would fall into the Stoppers category. One participant said:

“I hear all of the negative assumptions about this kind of relationship: he’s using me, he isn’t faithful, it wouldn’t last because of our age difference, etc. I got tired of defending my relationship. I used to tell the truth, but now it’s just not worth it. He’s just my husband, end of discussion, ‘do you explain why you love your husband?’, I asked one friend who got rude with me.”

One woman commented that she was a former military wife and she very much identified with the prison wife role, but she was quick to explain:

“...but I wouldn’t tell very many people this, most others wouldn’t understand and would think that I being disrespectful because my husband wasn’t risking his life for our freedoms and I didn’t have a right to make that comparison, but I have all the right in the world, because I lived it. No, my husband being in prison is

not as noble as a soldier fighting at war, I know this, but outside of that, the roles are very similar: the restricted communication, the inability to know that he's safe, the separation, and the increased responsibilities on me to maintain the household and to take care of our children and there's only one income to do it all with. It's noble if a military wife misses her husband, the community rallies around her, but as a prison wife, they shame you though the strength that is required is often similar."

A wife expressed how grateful she was to have the interview as she otherwise rarely gets the opportunity to gush about her husband. I (as the interviewer) and only one other person knew that she was involved with someone in prison. "I just live my life. I'm not stuck or forced like a lot of the general public may assume. He's just my husband."

One wife had an issue with filing taxes because of her husband's incarceration. His W2 Statement of Tax Earnings was sent to the wrong address.

"I'm legally married to him, but the company won't send it again to me correctly so I can file our taxes because I'm not him. I don't have the money to set up a legal power of attorney like they said I needed and he can't call to straighten it out. It's one thing when people just aren't nice to you, but it's another when I can't do what I need to do."

Being dishonest about their relationship was generally not an answer for almost everyone interviewed, however some women had concerns about an ex-partner who might use this information to seek custody of their children, or to harass them for any number of reasons.

A popular approach that usually put off further questioning or bought the wife time to prepare for further discussion was to just change the subject entirely. But, some

women don't have the option of deflecting the question of where their husband is, when I asked one wife if she had a story for his absence, she said, "No, it was in the news, I can't lie about it."

When a few wives decided to share their stories with others, not all responses were negative. For example, when one woman told a friend at work, the friend was grateful because she had a parent in prison and the two had a common bond that brought some normalcy to the shared experiences they otherwise did not feel comfortable talking about. This was common for those women who felt comfortable enough to share their story with others; they would often come across other people who had a loved one in prison, but who otherwise wouldn't have spoken out about this situation. When another woman spoke out at church, she received support from someone else that had a family member in prison and she appreciated that her church as a whole was supportive.

All women exhibited a way of managing the information shared about their relationship. Even those women who initially said that they didn't do anything to hide the relationship later shared some way of managing their identity to others. As could be assumed, all stories that addressed their missing partner were rooted in some kind of secrecy and spoke to his inaccessibility. Whether a woman's husband was working an odd schedule on an oilrig or living out of state to go to college, the men were accounted for, but otherwise inaccessible. One woman had not told her closest friends that she was in a serious committed relationship with a man in prison and her friends were often trying to set her up on dates, which became awkward to try to continually avoid.

## **Type of Crime**

The extent to which the study participants felt the effects of their husband's crime also depended on how socially acceptable or unacceptable the crime was. While many participants were forthcoming with me about their husband's crime within the context of the interview, I never asked. It's taboo for many reasons: sometimes pending litigation restricts discussion, and other times the charge for the crime may sound worse than what it actually was. When women did speak of their partner's crime, they were forthcoming about his guilt or innocence as related to the charges. Many men were incarcerated for drug use or drug related crimes, but only minimal support was given to the majority of inmates suffering from addiction. Some men were sentenced for crimes of a sexual or violent nature. And others were there as a result of a broken system: innocence, paying the price for a bad plea deal, or what they felt was ineffective counsel, for example. Those that chose to share the details of the crime seemed to do so honestly, no matter how unfavorably the story depicted their husband. All of the women separated the decisions that he may have made that led him to imprisonment from the relationship that they had together outside of his charges. Two women secretly wondered if their husband was guilty, but did seem to rationalize that even if he were, it would not matter and stated a variation of "he wouldn't do that to me anyhow."

Everyone that I spoke to referenced the injustices of the system that happened along the way to their husband, either in arrest, trial, or sentencing, or most certainly in prison. Women said repeatedly that society at large is unaware of these injustices and it only becomes real to them when it happens to their own loved one. This indicated that not only did the prison wives feel a stigma attached to their relationship choice, but also to the very fact that he was in prison.

And, this unawareness further validated the women's stories of being treated differently based on their husband's crime and in general for being married to a prisoner.

Cheryl has recently married a man who lives half the country away. He is there for charges related to addiction and has been sentenced to life. He's been in prison before and is not likely to get parole the first or perhaps the second time, but she's committed to him despite this. It wasn't without careful consideration and she recalls asking herself early on, "Can I really do this?" She is appreciative that he is there, he is safe from the life he led before that was centered around addiction, but "I've lost friends and my family doesn't recognize that I'm married, they won't talk about my husband or anything having to do with him and it's a large part of my life so we are pretty disconnected," Cheryl said.

Three of the interviewees shared that they were recovering from drug addiction themselves. They happened to be in a relationship with men who also were recovering addicts, and those men happened to be in prison for crimes related to addiction. Also, interestingly, they shared that their relationship was at its healthiest point since he had been incarcerated. Because their husbands were sober and because his sobriety supported the wives' efforts to be sober, too, the relationship was healthy. One wife explained:

"He's a good dad, a good man, a hard worker and he's in prison because of addiction. But, he's clean right now and that's a good place to start because it keeps me clean, too. That's the perspective that I keep, it's how I cope and focus on my own recovery. I love him, for better or worse, and this just happens to be the worse part right now."

In one case, both the wife and the husband were arrested in related crimes and sentenced to prison, providing each the chance to get sober and build on their long history but now without

the effects of addiction. This is not to say that staying sober in prison is easy or a prisoner's only choice; it was often mentioned that there is no shortage of drugs available within the prison walls and without an source of rehabilitation, the struggle was even harder for some within a confined space that offered little hope.

A sober lifestyle was the foundation for the support that one woman had from her family. Very few parents were completely supportive, but this was especially the case for Kelly. Having previously suffered from addiction and mental health issues herself, she met a man in prison who was also recovering from addiction. The two of them motivate each other daily to live healthy lifestyles even though they aren't in the same state.

One man who is an addict was sentenced for what was considered a violent crime that stemmed from his addiction--he was charged for injuring a man who attacked him. Though he readily identifies as an addict, because the crime he was charged for was not directly related to drugs or alcohol, he will not receive addiction rehabilitation or counseling. Additionally as he was charged with a "violent crime" with a longer sentence he is not eligible for college level courses. But, the prison did require him to take a class on anger management to teach him how to react without violence. This type of story was reported from many of the wives.

About 75% of interviewees shared information about their husbands' convictions. Of those, about a third reported drug, drinking, or addiction-related crimes. And, of that third who reported drug/alcohol related crimes; only two responded that their husband was receiving any type of rehabilitation related to addiction, which meant that the rest were given no guidance or support on how to live a clean lifestyle. This lack of rehabilitative support caused concern for their wives who were left to wonder how he would fare if or when he was released. One of the

women mentioned that a part of her didn't want him to be released as she worried this would start the drug use cycle over again and the outcome would not be positive for either of them.

Rory says that she leaves out the part about his sentence that has to do with the violent crime he charged with because he had a gun at the time. She does this because it seems that people are otherwise more understanding if it was a crime without violence.

### **Daily Life and Coping**

Issues in the workplace were a common concern among the women. One of the women I interviewed who was affiliated with corrections chose to resign her position deemed a conflict of interest in order to stay committed to the relationship, though this didn't stop the difficulties of visits. She lost her visiting privileges and he has so far been unable to transfer from the prison at which she worked. She feels that this is retaliatory and they are struggling to maintain the relationship without pushback from the facility.

The study participants all explained that their lives had to revolve around their husband's schedule, but this was often a tricky process. Regular phone calls seem to be one of the most important parts of the prison relationship, regardless of how often they are, but the interviewees all reflected on how hard it can be to make them happen. It was often impractical or difficult to manipulate work schedules, break times, or everyday routines based on when he could call. Because of the inability for a wife to call her husband back or to be certain that he could call as scheduled due to lock downs, work obligations, prison phone availability, or available funds for the expensive phone calls, the disconnect between the prison rhythm and the rhythm of the rest of the non-incarcerated world is very apparent (Wahidin, 2006).

To do their best to receive calls, the women reported never being separated from their phone, some even carrying two phones in case something happened to one of them; also, they

tried to always stay where there was a strong signal and always made sure the cell phone was charged. “That thing (the cell phone) wasn’t any big deal before, but now it’s our lifeline,” Melissa explained. Phone calls take precedence over other obligations whenever possible. Some women will schedule their lunches or break times at work around when he can call. They all reported structuring their day with mandatory count times in mind (head counts in facilities usually means that phones cannot be used during this time). Count times were best for scheduling appointments or other personal phone calls that the wives needed to take care of that could require use of their phone. Generally, facilities limit phone calls to certain times of the day, but other restrictions like available money, or in the case of some federal inmates, the restrictive 300 minutes per month they are allowed for phone calls, caused restrictions beyond just convenience.

Valerie’s husband has nearly 15 years left on his sentence. They are not legally married yet. She said,

“Once I answer the phone, it counts as a call. He’s allowed 20-minute phone calls, but I’ll only answer if I can talk for the whole time, which is rare. I’m at work when he can get to the phone. In the beginning I would structure my day around his schedule, but it’s just too hard, sometimes he can’t call as planned and sometimes I don’t have control over my schedule for work. But, I’m glad, he just encourages me to live my life and we’ll work around whatever I need to be doing.”

One woman with a bachelor’s degree chose to forego career employment because she could “get by” with a lower paying job that supported the family and allowed the flexibility of weekend visits, effectively trading a higher salary for visits based on his limited phone minutes

per month as a federal inmate. Because of the limitation, it was more practical for her to visit as often as she could rather than rely on getting phone calls from him.

Consistently women spoke of the few advantages to this type of relationship – mostly improved communication and appreciation of the little moments that can be taken for granted in non-prison relationships – but many negatives were also reported just as consistently: the loneliness, the exhaustion (physical and emotional), the toll it takes mentally to stay positive about the situation, and the isolation that comes from not feeling accepted.

“I work, I take care of the kids and I wait for him to call and as dull or difficult as that sounds, I am fulfilled, and I think other people’s inability to understand how this can be fulfilling for me makes it hard for them to accept my lifestyle, but it’s not for them.”

Other examples of adaptation came from a more convenient work environment:

“My work now is in a related field so they understand that if the phone rings I need to take the call. They know he’s in prison, but not why and so I don’t have to adjust much during the day.”

In this chapter I’ve discussed different types of stigma and how the stereotype can factor into the judgment that prison wives feel. Prison wives are strategic in their presentation of self in their workplace, among their friends and family and based on how they perceive their audience’s judgment of their lifestyle. They are careful to manage their identity in order to protect themselves emotionally from the stigma they feel and actually experienced because they are married to a man in prison. I have also developed the typology of Riders and Stoppers to describe how two different types of prison wives process and react to the stigmatization that comes with their relationship. This seems to be a rational response to the expectation of stigma and negative judgment. Chapter 5 will

focus on effects of this judgment on children and on the relationship or the women's lives otherwise.

## **Chapter 5 - Extension of Stigma**

While study participants reported the effects of stigmatization extend to their children, what may be surprising is that the effect on children is not always negative. Mothers that I interviewed consistently linked support from family, a positive outlook and positive interaction between their child and their husband in prison as a successful and beneficial relationship for their children. In this chapter I will discuss the effects of stigma and shaming including the difficulties that come from this type of a relationship.

### **Effect on Children**

In 2012, an estimated 2.6 million children had an incarcerated parent (Phillips, 2012); however, since there is no formal method or agency for tracking this information, such an estimate is difficult to determine. When a father is sent to prison, the chances are nearly 9 times out of 10 that their children will end up living with their mother (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). The child of an incarcerated parent may often be protected from the truth of the situation either by the residential parent creating a false explanation for the father's absence or by avoiding the topic altogether depending on the child's age. Ultimately, either of these options can lead to a child finding out in an unplanned way (Condry, 2013). Children can also be put into compromising positions when it comes to explaining their father's situation to others throughout the community or even one's own family (Condry, 2013). One of the most common concerns was putting the children in a difficult position when they were around an unsupportive biological father or other family members.

Many of the women interviewed had children. Of those women, I asked: "How does having your [husband] in prison affect your children?" Based on the responses given, all children were affected, but it was rarely negative if the mother received positive support from her network

and if the child had the opportunity to build, or maintain, a connection to her husband, often the father of the children involved.

All of the mothers that I interviewed had gone to great lengths to protect their children from being affected negatively by her husband being in prison, regardless of age. It was not uncommon for the women interviewed to keep the truth from younger children. For children that were too young to understand the idea of “prison,” age appropriate explanations were provided. This was especially true of children who were not the biological children of the man in prison. One wife explained that since the children were already used to not seeing him regularly because he didn’t live with them, it saved the difficult explanation and didn’t put the children in a difficult position if they were to talk about it in school. For one interviewee, it was an issue of practicality. Her husband was housed too far away for the costly visit, so she explained to their young children that he got a job in another state. One mother that I interviewed explained to her two children that their father was in the hospital. They were used to him being gone for previous hospital stays due to illnesses.

Some children went to visit their fathers in prison and understood that it was where “daddy worked.” Some children (who weren’t biological children of the inmate) didn’t visit their mother’s partner in prison but would talk on the phone to him completely unaware of the situation, as their mother would monitor the time of the phone call so the children didn’t hear the pre-recorded information announcing or ending as one from a correctional facility. Women who let their children interact with their husband, regardless of whether they knew of his location in prison, repeatedly indicated that the child had a good relationship with their husband. Age appropriate descriptions helped foster a relationship in and of itself regardless of a child trying to decipher what prison was and this led to healthy relationships for child and the wife’s husband if

he was not the child's biological father. A positive and open relationship between a child and a woman's incarcerated husband significantly decreased the added stress of balancing an already limited schedule between being a single parent and finding time to sneak in phone calls if the child was unaware of the situation.

One woman explained how helpful her fiancé was to [his] daughter, but how difficult it was because though they had a good father-daughter relationship in which the daughter respected and listened to her father's advice, it was more difficult because of the limited interaction they could have due to financial constraints of both visits and phone calls.

Most of the women who were trying to maintain a relationship with his children from previous relationships had a difficult time trying to work with the mother with residential custody of the children, especially when it came to visitation. I learned repeatedly from my interviews that in most facilities, minor children cannot visit their father in prison without the other parent or legal guardian attending the visit with them. This means that if the biological mother did not wish for her child to see their dad, even a very involved stepmother could not take a minor child to visit their biological father in prison. This became problematic in two cases where the children were teenagers and old enough to want to see their father, but because they were not yet of age and their biological mother wasn't supportive, they could not visit.

Children who had an absent father who had previously lived at home with them had the hardest time adjusting to his absence. The day-to-day effects were more negative for the children who were teenagers in this interview sample. Toddlers had little awareness of the situation and adult children seemed less fazed as a group, but teenagers seemed to exhibit the common emotional or behavioral difficulties (those often related to puberty) that might have been more easily and successfully addressed by having their father at home to help guide them.

One mother said that she worried about her son who was 14 years old and in need of his father's guidance. His father is in prison for selling drugs to help support the family. The wife explained that he didn't use drugs and it wasn't like him to make such a poor choice, but he got pulled into a situation with someone he trusted that turned out to not be trustworthy. The mother had a hard time explaining her husband's bad choices to her son. The situation was further worsened because she now had to work a second job that made even her unavailable to her son. This family in particular indicated the least discretionary income for maintaining phone communication, allowing only \$20/month most of the time. This was especially difficult for her struggling son and particularly concerning given the nature of his crime.

It was mentioned repeatedly that children were often less negatively affected if there was a supportive extended family involved in helping the mother carry the burden of a single parent household. An example of this was Sydney. Without her husband's income and help with their four children, she had to move farther away from him to live with family. But in doing so, there was extra support to meet the children's needs and this also helped ease the burden on Sydney.

During three of my interviews, the children of the interviewee became curious about the video chat. Older children readily told me about their mom's partner, with smiles and confidence that was reassuring and validated what had been explained so far about children's positive reaction to the mother's husband in prison. One daughter popped across the screen during our interview. The little girl was beaming as she spoke of her mother's soon-to-be-husband, whom she referred to as "dad," while referring to her biological dad as simply and without affection her "real dad."

Another young girl explained how she plays hide and seek on the phone with her mom's soon to be husband, Jonathan. She explained with a big smile, "he tries to find me, but

sometimes he doesn't see me." We chatted for just a couple of minutes and she told me that he asks about her report card and she likes to visit him. There was no apprehension in her willingness to talk about him and her affection seemed genuine.

Valerie's young son doesn't know that she's in a romantic relationship with a man in prison. He attends visits with her, but he believes that they go to see his mother's "friend." Because Valerie is worried about the judgment she will receive, she has told only one friend who also has a close relationship with someone in prison. She said that she limits whom she tells because she doesn't want the local community or her family and friends to develop a preconceived idea of who her fiancé is without him first being able to establish himself as a non-criminal. She is also worried about how experiences of societal judgment might affect her son. Her fiancé has 15 years left on his sentence and she plans to tell her son when he gets older and she thinks he will be able to better understand. "My young son goes on visits with me sometimes. He loves going and enjoys the time with my fiancé, but he doesn't know that he and I are romantically involved."

In most cases, the children who are older are aware of the relationship between their mother and her partner in prison. This is of no issue with most biological children who were often more likely to be immediately affected by the arrest and sentencing process. Those with younger children who were already a part of the husband's life prior to incarceration usually would take the child with them to visit. However, mothers of younger children who are unaware explained visits by saying that they are "going to see daddy at work" and that "daddy's work has a lot of security" in order to make it easier for them to understand. One mother told me that at her daughter's parent/teacher conference, the teacher said that the daughter had said something

about her dad being in prison. The mother just laughed it off and commented about the silly things that kids say.

Overall the interviews indicated that the effects on children were largely lessened by a supportive environment and network of family and friends. Including children as appropriate in a relationship with her husband decreased a mother's anxiety over hiding the truth or the truth coming out unplanned and allowed the mother the opportunity to oversee the child's interaction and to help support questions the child may have about her husband being in prison as the relationship progressed. There was clear indication from the interviews that stress that the mothers felt in protecting their children from biological fathers who threatened custody or tried to block the relationship between the children and her husband worsened things for the mother and ultimately the child who may pick up on the stressors and difficulties between parents.

### **Validity of the Relationship**

In addition to impacting children, the stigmatization reported by the study participants also affected their relationships with their husbands. One assumption the women perceived that others had was that the imprisonment of the partner somehow lessened the validity of their relationship. I asked the women, "What do you think that society would find surprising about your relationship?" I also asked, "What is normal about your relationship?" Prison wives felt like others judged the validity of their feelings or the genuineness of their relationship with their husband in prison that somehow their relationships or they themselves were not taken seriously. The women also felt that they were judged as less than because their husband was in prison. This was a very incorrect assumption according to the wives.

Every woman spoke to the difficulty of the relationship, of the struggles, the lonely times, and for some the realization that she may never be with her husband outside of prison, and still

choosing him above all else. The wives all described what might seem like an overly romanticized relationship, but they felt that society assumed they had empty relationships, mostly because there was such limited physical interaction. All of the women described a stronger than average bond with their partner and the word “soulmate” was used by the women to describe their husbands. It came up often in the interviews that the inability to have sex was often the first thing that friends asked about; yet, it was one of the least important aspects of the relationship. “It’s just not about the sex, I mean, don’t get me wrong, I miss him, being with him, but it’s not as much because we could have sex but more because at the end of the day, I’d love to come home and have him here to hug me and sit on the couch with.” One wife giggled, “Other people are way more concerned with the fact that I can’t have sex with my husband than I am.” The absence of physical intimacy was commonly compensated for with phone sex, intimate pictures (as allowed by the facility), phone dates, love letters, and regular emails. Debbie summarized her relationship as follows:

“Here's the thing though, this journey allows us a closeness that most relationships outside of prison may never get to experience because we cannot be physically intimate, we have to have a very strong bond to get through it all and that can only come from a genuinely solid relationship. That doesn't mean that other people don't have solid relationships, but to make something out of what seems like nothing has its own strength.”

The interviewees all explained that their relationship was normal, but he just wasn’t “here” with them. Just like a non-prison relationship, all of the women described some level of arguing. While most indicated this was a rarity due to phone availability, cost, and prioritizing conversation for positive discussions, two women indicated that the same passion that fueled

their love for their husbands was also displayed in the form of occasional arguments given the limited options for other outlets for these emotions. Kaitlyn said,

“These guys have too much time on their hands. That means that most often, whatever is in front of them at the time, an argument for example, consumes them. Without any kind of distraction, the argument, probably minor to begin with, absorbs all of the passion, good and bad for the situation as a whole. The argument attracts all of the love, frustration, loneliness, etc., and while I can just distract myself some with work or the kids, he has nothing to keep him from focusing on it and putting it under the microscope so that something that wasn’t even a big deal to begin with can become a huge deal just so it’s the outlet for the situation.”

The women described a love that transcended all else and the common denominator was communication. Even though the number of phone calls was low, the qualities of the conversations were routinely described as containing above average depth and sincerity. A deep and meaningful conversation is the only currency for the relationship and this is why phone calls and visits, especially, were so vital to both the sustainability and the fulfillment of the relationship. All of the wives acknowledged the proficient communication skills they both had, but just as quickly explained that it took a lot of effort. One woman explained that there are just some things that could not be compensated for: facial expressions and communication via body language couldn’t be replaced, but by focusing on the tone of his voice, changes in the patterns of their normal communication would often yield similar information about a change in disposition in either the husband or wife.

Woman after woman echoed that other non-prison relationships just didn't compare to what they had with their husbands now and the quality of the relationship, of the communication even challenged by structural parameters, made the waiting and the hurdles worth it. Susan said, "I don't think that people understand how connected you can be when all you have is verbal communication. Tone of voice and the value of effective communication keep us connected even though we are apart. I know him emotionally in a way that is unique and we really connect. I'm 33 years old and I don't think I've been in love before, because I've never felt this way, I've never felt this happy and content."

One woman explained what many had mentioned, that she and her husband had a special connection and an ability to just be aware of the other person even though they were not together and often states apart. She had been injured at work and he called earlier than normal because he'd just had a bad feeling, and he was right. She explained that over the past 10 years of his sentence they have always had this bond.

Natasha knew right away that he was her soul mate. She said that she had never felt that about her ex-husband to whom she had been married for 10 years: "No, I never thought I would be a prison wife, but being a prison wife is the happiest I have ever been."

Susan, similar to many of the other women who met their partner after he was incarcerated, explained that she didn't think the friendship would lead to anything romantic. She explained that things happened so fast and they clicked so quickly with each other that it caught her off guard, but it all felt so right. This was a common description of the relationship of the women who met their husbands after he was incarcerated. Friends introduced some; others chose to pursue a friendship that developed romantically. There are websites that help connect prisoners to pen pals and some seek romance along the way. Susan was introduced by a friend

who was in a prison relationship, but when Susan's relationship took off, her friend became spiteful and told Susan that she was crazy for having a relationship with him. The friend warned that he would control Susan and probably be abusive upon release even though neither his crime nor previous behaviors gave any cause for concern.

In describing how she met her husband, Kaitlyn said, "He protected me and defended me when I was in an abusive relationship. He's always been there to look out for me and my kids, even before it was romantic between us, he just always did the right thing and things developed from there." She went on to explain that her life is pretty much normal. As she described it,

"I'm a busy single mom. I work; I take care of the kids. I get a lot of support from social media groups (with other prison wives) and that helps because I tend to stay in and keep to myself. It saves money and then I'm free if he can call me."

Prison wives explained that they felt that their relationships were judged as invalid because their husbands were in prison. In reviewing their perceptions of the stereotype that I discussed previously in Chapter 4, the women felt that their relationships did not match up to the societal norm and expectation primarily based on societal judgment of inmates. But the interviewees described feeling stigmatized by being married to a man in prison. They described feeling compared to non-prison relationships and felt that those relationships were accepted as the societal norm; therefore, the prison wives deviant relationship was judged negatively.

### **Difficulties**

Even the most perfectly described romances came with struggles. Most of the difficulties of the relationship had to do with the readjustments to life upon release; however, the very restrictive nature, almost seemingly built to lessen the likelihood of successful social interaction while men were in prison, created hurdles during his sentence, too. These struggles, which often

existed outside of the relationship, were usually structural and many had to do with the lack of guidance, support, and rehabilitation the men reported to have not received while in prison.

While the benefits of visitation were beneficial to the prisoner, prison visits were stressful for family members (Arditti, 2012). Wives explained that some of the biggest frustrations came from difficulties related to visitation experiences and procedures. In-person visit experiences varied among the women interviewed; however, most commonly women indicated that while visits are tolerable, the process of making them happen was never pleasant. The process is long and arduous for the women. The process to get ready, to follow dress code policy, and even just to arrive at the facility was routinely described as exhausting. One woman explained:

"I live 3.5 hours away so I'd stay the night before and wake up at 5:30 to get ready and be there by 9:30 to be early enough to get processed to see him by 12. Visits are only for 4 hours, so if I wasn't the first few in line, I was delayed getting to see him and it cut into our visit time. The drive home is the worst; it's difficult and sad, and tiring after an early morning. I'd do this weekly whenever I could. Certain shifts were more lenient than others and having staff who weren't hell bent on the rules made the time feel more normal."

Debbie said one of the hardest parts of being married to a man in prison was the visitation policies and procedures. "The process is rough, not all of the officers are respectful and I hate feeling like I've done something wrong because of how they treat me...they treat me just like an inmate." Another wife said that she didn't how her husband could take such disrespect on a regular basis. She understood that he made the mistake to be put in prison, but didn't feel that it warranted disrespect on top of it. But in addition to that she added, "I don't know how he takes it, but I certainly don't deserve it when I visit him."

One significant visitation problem reported by study participants was that they were not child-friendly. In most states, minor children who are not biologically or legally connected to the inmate cannot visit. So if a woman had a child with another man, but wasn't yet married to the inmate, the minor child could not visit. But even when children were allowed, often women would choose to leave them home, as most visiting room rules did not accommodate younger children who were unwilling or unable to be held or to remain seated. Some visitation rooms were equipped with toys and children's books, but they were often described as worn, broken, and unclean, or not age appropriate.

Most corrections officers were more informal when "shaking down" (patting down to check for contraband) kids, often making a game of them putting their arms out to their sides to "show the officer how they fly". Such child-friendly actions made the regular visits for one woman and her child almost fun, but this was facility and officer specific. One prison wife reported that she had to remind staff to treat her kids like kids because they seem to get so used to "bossing adults around."

However, other facilities didn't seem to treat children any differently than they did adults when processing them for a visit. One interviewee recalled her daughter, a toddler, being brought to tears by an officer's adamant request for her to walk through the metal detector on her own. She explained that even though she had always carried her daughter through the metal detector on previous visits, one time an officer insisted she walk through on her own, and having to coax her through without warning or preparation was traumatic for both of them. Another mother explained what she felt was not fair treatment of her child during a visit,

"I brought this up to the Warden's office and next time the officer was more friendly, but I shouldn't have to help them to do their job properly, they should be willing

and know to show some compassion when there are kids involved. I'm willing to bet they've never had any sensitivity training and not all mothers are as bold as I am. We are assumed to be meek, but I won't have them not respecting my child's experience when visiting my husband."

The women also reported that Correction Officers (C.O.s) were unfriendly and often rude to them as well. There were multiple statements that indicated that C.O.s were rude and judgmental, often abusing of their power and retaliatory in their interactions. The women generally admitted to being more submissive than normal because of a lack of power in situations where the C.O.s can and did use the visit as leverage to bend policy to fit their own agenda. Interviewees indicated that they tried to be polite and respectful and while it may at times be well received, none of them ever felt routinely respected or professionally treated when visiting their partner. One woman commented that she considers it a good day if the staff just isn't rude; she's given up on them being nice.

Prison wives explained that rules for visitation, especially as to what clothing was acceptable, were changed frequently, were explained disrespectfully, if at all, and were often applied unevenly and with condescension. Debbie said that she's allowed only minimal jewelry, no belts, no metal in her shoes, and no underwire bras. She cannot wear clothing that is sheer, sleeveless, or too tight. While similar rules were reported by nearly all of the women interviewed, they seemed to be enforced arbitrarily. Officers interpreted and applied the rules inconsistently, which often meant that women who had worn the same outfit previously were turned away another time by either the same or a different officer. As a precaution, the women said they generally take extra clothes with them in order to change as needed at the facility to meet the changing demands of the corrections staff. Those who do not have bring extra clothes

or who were new to the system and unfamiliar with dress code policies are made to leave often after waiting in line for initial check-in. Others who do not live nearby explained being sent down the street to purchase new clothes from a local store.

In one instance, the C.O. indicated that the woman who was visiting needed to wear a different shirt, so she left the facility to buy a new shirt and returned only to find that a staff change had occurred. The new shift officer would not let her in with the jeans that she was wearing (that previously weren't of any issue to the other shift's officer). Since they lacked pockets the current shift officer considered them to be stretch pants (which violated the clothing policy) because she thought they fit too tightly. Making the situation even more difficult was the fact that the woman had worn the same pants for several different visits and there had not been any recent policy changes that would since prohibit them. It seemed to her that the C.O. just wanted to assert power in the situation. As inmates are transferred regularly and without notification, women may wear clothes they have worn to other facilities to a new facility only to be turned away without any way of being able to prevent this.

As shared by one interviewee:

“Often the staff at prison is just rude. We want to see our husbands; we aren't in the mood to waste time arguing with them. Most of us have been doing this for a while and come ready to follow the policies. But when the policies keep changing or the C.O.s just feel like applying them differently, it makes it much harder than it needs to be. It's more rare than not that I feel like I've been treated with the same respect I've shown them.

Some just make it their mission to get in the way.”

Another one said:

"The day starts really early to arrive on time and be ready. Searches aren't bad, the dirty looks are expected, but the non-contact visits through glass are worse than I thought. I hate knowing they can and do listen to our phone calls. Once I got a really classy dress, measured it to make sure it was approved and was so excited to wear it for him and then I got there and the guards gave me a hard time. The guards are picky about who they enforced the rules with, but I've taken the kids a couple of times and they loved talking to him. I visit every weekend except if his parents want to go for one weekend."

Another participant described the correction officers this way: "It depends on the day, usually they're not rude, but visits aren't a priority to them at all." She visited her husband while he was restricted to non-contact visits:

"Visits are loud with about 40 other people in the non-contact room, and the room is small and dark, not pleasant or comfortable at all. One time he had to cut our non-contact visit short because he had to use the restroom, which would cancel our visit. Because they were having visits in the contact area, he couldn't use the bathroom so the guards gave him a bottle to urinate in."

This wasn't the only complaint about restroom restrictions. One interviewee recalled, "We have a 6-hour visit, but he can't get up or stretch and walk around or use the bathroom. If he does need to use the bathroom it ends our visits." Restroom breaks for most facilities were restricted to zero or one break during a visit. Additional breaks would bring an end the visit or force another visit that counted toward the monthly allotment. Once the inmate arrives to the visiting room, some facilities do not allow the inmate to move around unless they get permission to stand to use the restroom or until they leave from the visit. This can mean that they are not permitted to move or stretch for what could be a 12-hour visit.

Though the participants reported the inconveniences with frustration, they would prefer those inconveniences to not being able to visit at all. It can be devastating to lose the right to visits. Reasons for losing visitation vary per facility, but unfortunately and not surprisingly, often times the reasons are arbitrary and often cannot be appealed further, meaning that the facility can get away with whatever they want to, as many interviewees explained.

Another interviewee shared:

"I haven't seen him for over 2 years. He had a medical issue and collapsed at our last visit and because the facility won't recognize his medical issue, the guards said he was causing a disturbance and he was sanctioned. Then because I have family who work in the system, the prison said that I was helping him to plan his escape and took away my visits. This couldn't be further from the truth. They just draw conclusions however they want to in order to control us as much as the inmate. "

Visits are not taken for granted; they are the biggest connection to society for the inmate and often the only time that a husband and wife can connect on important family or relationship topics. In-person visits are important and are often more practical than phone, letters, or email for working through issues or delicate discussions. For some a visit is a less expensive option than the phone calls; for others, visit costs can be astronomical. Most facilities will limit the amount of money that can be spent on vending machine food and drinks during a visit. Few facilities that the women I interviewed told me about allow regular paper or coin money to be used. Instead, they may require a pay card that is only for prison use that acts like a debit card so that cash isn't brought into the facility. However, a some women reported that the likelihood that the vending machines would run out of food, didn't work or that the card machine was not

operational was high. This meant that there were some longer visits where the couple got very hungry and sometimes ended their visit early so they could leave to eat.

Sometimes the difficulties experience during the prison sentence carried over post-release. In the same way that several wives spoke to their husband's current place in prison as better than it was before, Anne, whose partner was released after we initially spoke said she preferred the relationship with him in prison instead of out of prison. While he was in prison, their relationship was stable, she got regular attention via letters and phone calls, and she could see the fruition of his efforts toward their relationship. Now he's struggling and their relationship is, too. During his most recent sentence she longed for him to be home, to help with their son, to share the responsibilities of their family and to be able to finally be free of the multi-sentence relationship they had experienced so far. But it has not turned out that way. She begs him to come off the streets and spend time with their son. "He's addicted to the fast money lifestyle," she explained. She thinks it is only a matter of time before he ends up back in prison, and she pondered whether or not this was a bad thing. She believes that prison time has affected his ability to see the world as a place that he can be a part of without hustling. His own father was in prison and most of the men in his family had been as well. He never had a relationship with his father or had his father as a positive role model,

"He was never taught how to be a man in our society, or more specifically, how to be a black man who didn't have to hustle to exist. He just can't fathom a straight life. I thought he would change this time, I hoped he would, but I worry that he won't, and I really don't know if it's fair that I do at this point."

I asked her to explain this against the belief that at some point a person matures or makes their mind up to change, so they do. She said:

“I know, I understand, but I guess since he was raised by prison, then society should expect that he would actually get those skills in prison. But, he didn’t. They didn’t do anything to help him be a better person, a better father, so of course he didn’t change. If anything it made it worse. The burden on me for the lawyer costs, the phone calls, the cost of our child and only on my salary, didn’t do anything but taunt him to hustle in prison just to help me out.” He’s been in prison before. I worried when he was out, I sleep better with him back in prison, but then I worry about him being out again. They don’t help him there, nothing has changed as far as his ability to cope on the outside—will he get arrested again, will the kids be here, will he come home with drugs on him because he’s selling again since he can’t find a job?”

She relayed that he tried to get help when he knew he was getting into trouble again, and he asked his parole officer about rehab or treatment and explained that he couldn’t find work, but the parole officer had nothing to offer and instead the parole officer indicated that when he got picked up again, at least he’d have the chance to get clean in prison, even for a short time.

Two interviewees spoke of how they felt their husband’s were judged as less important because they were inmates and therefore their husbands did not receive adequate health care. This is an example of how the wives often feel that they can be treated differently or less than based on their husband’s label as an inmate. Jamie told a story of her husband’s experience trying to get prescribed medication while in prison. Though he has a documented heart condition that requires medication, he’s not able to have it in prison because at some point it was documented in his prison medical chart that he refused his medication, even though she says he never did. But because it was documented that it happened, he is not able to get the medication now because it seems the logic of the facility is that since he refused it, he doesn’t really need it.

She speculates that this inaccurate, documentation would seem to cover the facility legally if something were to happen to him and that it saves the facility money to not provide the medication, and saves the effort to track and document the follow-up visits and blood work that the diagnosis requires.

Sydney is glad that her husband is in prison because he has a mental health diagnosis and being removed from society is a good thing in as much as it allows him the time to become more stable and to receive the treatment that he needs, though it is unfortunate that this is by way of prison. She said that this time has allowed him to be a much better partner and father to their children. However, it took a while to get to this point. He had previously been psychologically misdiagnosed in jail when he was arrested before so that when he was released on probation, while not on medication, he re-offended during a psychotic episode. After initially being incarcerated, he was able to become stable on medication, but when transferred to the state prison, that state's system didn't allow the medication he was legally prescribed and this started a cycle of instability all over again.

The stories that the women told of their difficulties support their feelings of stigma by affiliation (recite?). Because they were visiting their husband in prison, they felt as though they were isolated by arbitrary prison policies and treated similarly to how their husband was treated as an inmate, simply because they were married to him and visiting him in prison.

### **Financial Exploitation**

Difficulties fighting the red tape of prison were hard enough, but the most common hurdle that women discussed was the sheer cost of not only financially supporting the most basic needs of her husband in prison, but also maintaining communication and ultimately the relationship, as well. As budgets tighten and less money can be spent on prison rehabilitation

and re-entry, the answer to a prisoner's successful re-entry falls on the family or support network. As Hairston, Rollin and Jo (2004) explain: "Although most reentry policies and programs focus roles of formal organization, there is an underlying assumption that prisoners' families and friends, not the state, will be the major sources of concrete aid and social and emotional support. (p. 1).

The prison wives overwhelmingly described feelings of financial exploitation. When a husband is incarcerated, one of the most quantifiable impacts is arguably financial. What may have been a two-income family is now only one, and the costs of legal help, time off work, travel costs for visits, and often childcare all increase (Christian et al., 2015).

One woman explained that she felt more exploited than stigmatized:

"The system punishes us more than them and in the meantime it does nothing to prevent them from going back. In fact, it makes it worse. I'm having such a hard time financially that he already mentioned that going back to selling drugs would be his back-up plan if his record prevents him from getting a job. The debt I've had to take on just to keep in touch with him is unacceptable and unfair."

Seven other women said that they were concerned about their husband returning based on the decreased chance he would be able to find work that paid a living wage but also helped cover the debt incurred while he was in prison for things like lawyer fees, restitution, back owed child support and loans or other debts for household needs and phone costs that added up during his sentence.

### **Costs**

The average monthly cost of supporting the financial needs of their husband among these interviewees was about \$600. This money went to needs inside the facility (food, toiletries) and

also the costs for day-to-day communication (email, phone calls, mail, packages). This cost did not include the occasional costs associated with a visit, particularly if it required out-of-state travel. One study participant reported that in a period 1.5 years, she spent about \$10,000 for the costs associated with her husband's incarceration: visits; his monthly costs for food, toiletries, and phone calls; lawyer fees; and additional child care. Generally, inmates receive the most basic needs of food and clothing, but many of the study participants reported that their partners spoke of being hungry and of not being fed enough or receiving sub-standard food. This meant that the women tried to supplement the regular meals provided three times a day by sending in food packages or additional money to allow their husbands to expand his food choices. One wife explained that the hardship meant that she needed to get a roommate because she was really supporting "two houses" (his needs and her own). While prisons provide "three hots and a cot," rations are often reported as not being enough to eat and those without any financial means on the outside suffer on the inside. The burden falls on the wife to provide for his needs while housed by the state, but without regard for the limitations of a one-income household that often supported children, too. Beyond that, the cost of items almost always included a high mark-up to allow for both profit to the prison vendor and often a kickback to the prison itself. The mark-up of toiletries and hygiene items was just as inflated, \$3.50 for a small tube of toothpaste or \$6.50 for mouthwash.

It was not easy for the women to send money to their husband and doing so often came with extraordinary fees that increased the costs associated with having a husband in prison. Women who had husbands that were in private, for-profit prisons reported the highest fees of all. One woman said that she paid a fee of \$16.95 for every \$100 she sent to him. Money transfer vendors charge a fee for this service. Vendors who contract with the prison to process money

transfers often give a portion of the profit to the prison as an incentive for choosing their service. Some prisons will use the fees toward a prisoner fund, others claim it offsets the cost to allow the service to be offered, and still others simply acknowledge it as profit.

## **Phone**

The most expensive and ongoing cost for prisoners and their families was phone contact. (Legal fees were mentioned as especially expensive, too; however, they are generally finite and lessen once the inmate has been sentenced and has exhausted the appeal process.) The fees charged by for-profit prison telephone vendors were astonishing. In one private state prison a wife reported paying \$9.00 to add \$25.00 to her husband's phone account. Each time she would accept his call, the flat rate of \$3.00 was charged, even if they got disconnected.

As discussed earlier, the couples became efficient communicators out of necessity – one factor driving this necessity was cost. Since talking by phone was expensive, they had to be especially quick and efficient. Honest, transparent, and efficient communication was a top priority and the glue of these relationships and each of the women were proud to profess their ability to communicate honestly because this is often such a difficult part of any relationship. While certainly love and commitment to a man in prison were important, being able to convey those positive and reassuring emotions by words – spoken, written or by way of a few hours of a visit together – was imperative.

## **Location**

Four states in the U.S. routinely send inmates to states with privately run for-profit prisons managed by companies like The GEO Group (GEO) or Corrections Corporation of American (CCA). By sending inmates to these private prisons, the inmate's home alleviates the issue of overcrowding and saves costs associated with housing the inmate many times over.

Though often paying a per inmate charge to house inmates in another location, states can still end up saving money. Most often money is saved in the area of staffing wages and benefits, and both initial building and maintenance of the facility itself.

There are very few regulations on how far an inmate can be sent; federal inmates, for example, can be sent to anywhere in the U.S. But, it's not uncommon for state prisons to transfer inmates far from home, as well. For example, prisoners from California may be sent to Arizona or prisoners from Vermont may end up being transferred to a privately run facility in Michigan. Hawaiians may be sent to a facility within the continental United States, leaving his wife and family to conquer the exorbitant cost of visits on one income. When studying the location of a prisoner in a state facility, Shirmer et al., (2009) found that 62% of prisoners who were parents were at least 100 miles away from home. Because of this, over half of these prisoners had never had a visit (Schirmer et al., 2009). While a trek like this could create a hardship on anyone, it is even harder to imagine or accept for the wife of an inmate who is not only a single mother to her children but also the single wage-earner for the household.

## **Visits**

In addition to sending inmates to other states, another cost-saving alternative some states use is to limit or even prohibit in-person visitation altogether, replacing it with video visitation. States claim that video visitation saves on staffing costs and generates revenue (Emmanuel, 2012). Facilities contract with video visitation vendors who will charge families and friends for online video visits. These fees, like the current prison phone fees charged by the contracted prison vendors like Global-Tel Link (GTL) or Securus, are not regulated and prisons see a kickback from the vendor's profit for the contractual relationship (Fulcher, 2013). Rates of at least \$1/minute for video visitation are standard, but additional fees for registering or setting up

an account, are common. This means that in an instance where a family member is located near the prisoner, video visitation may actually cost more than an in-person visit. And when comparing the wage of the staff member who oversees a large visiting room full of prisoners versus the cost of the visit to a prisoner's family, any cost-savings for the prison quickly turns to profit at the family member's expense. Petersilia (2003) explained that while contraband is most often passed during visits, "But in terms of re-entry, limiting family visits has significant implications for cutting the very contacts the inmate needs to succeed on the outside."

Granted, video visitations can help an inmate and his family connect in a way that in-person visits don't allow. The ability for a father to see his child's bedroom or help his daughter work through a math problem is only possible where video visitation is an option. At the same time, this isn't to say that in-person visits are perfect either. On top of the travel costs associated with visits that have already discussed in this chapter, the costs can add up once visitors arrive as well – for example, during visits that can range from six to twelve hours, vending machines are the visitors' only food and drink options. One woman explained that the vending machine costs were often inflated above standard market rates. Still, for many reasons, in-person visits should not be fully replaced by video visitation. In-person "visitations offer inmates the only face-to-face opportunities they have to preserve or restore relationships that have been severed by imprisonment" (Maruna & Toch, 2005, p. 167).

## **Chapter 6 - Conclusion, Future Research**

This study's participants experienced stigma as a result of their marriage to a prisoner. The women felt stigmatized by how they were treated by others because of their commitment to a man in prison. Beyond the societal judgments the women felt, women described structural challenges and limitations that often led to additional feelings of judgment and stigmatization, as well as material costs. Prison wives spoke often of the tangible manifestation of the stigmatization that was shown as the exploitation by for-profit companies that they had to patronize in order to maintain the relationships and to provide for their husbands' basic needs. These women explained that they feel stigmatized when they are judged for committing to a man in prison and feel exploited when they are taken advantage of financially to support their relationship and the relationship of their husband with other family or children in the household.

I identified two groups of prison wives within this research: Riders and Stoppers. Each group negotiated being a prison wife differently. Riders were often those women who were committed to a man with a long sentence or who had been committed to him for quite some time already. Stoppers were generally younger and newer to this type of relationship and had experienced the lifestyle during a shorter period of time. The experiences of both of these groups were valid and there is not a hierarchy to them or any further comparison between them as to the validity of their feelings. Riders often did not perceive that the stigma that they felt was actually stigma because they were confident in their decision and did not recognize the judgments that they had either grown used to, or ignored in their daily lives. Stoppers on the other hand were more sensitive to the feelings of judgment and often had a more difficult time integrating their relationship into the friendships and relationships with family members. While Riders accepted the negative experiences as commonplace and more easily brushed them off,

Stoppers were still trying to find a place for the difficulties that were new with this lifestyle. Stoppers eventually ended their relationships or transitioned and became Riders.

The women in this study were aware of the stereotype that society had of them, but my research indicated that this sample group did not fit the assumed stereotype, and they were well educated, working and raising their children as single parents. Based on the present research, I believe that if societal views of inmates and their families were to improve then it would be much harder to the for-profit companies that house and supply goods to the inmates to take advantage of the families involved in supporting his incarceration. Additionally, there seems to be room for improving visitation experiences to encourage the maintenance of relationships as stepping-stones to a more successful reentry experience for the former inmate, his family and the community to which he will return.

Depending on how the women identified within the two groups often affected how they presented themselves to others. Riders often were matter-of-fact about their relationship and were straightforward about their husband's prisoner status. Stoppers more often had an explanation for his absence in her day-to-day life. The type of crime that the men were charged with also affected how the women felt they were treated and how they portrayed themselves to others. Those with husbands who had crimes of a violent or sexual nature were more guarded than those with a non-violent or drug crime. Not all women shared the nature of their husband's crime, but those who did explained that they felt treated differently because of it, in comparison between the types of offenses. All of the women adapted their lives and habits to accommodate their relationship including taking specific jobs with flexibility for visits or working additional jobs to support the costs of his needs and the astronomical telephone costs, or not sharing the

details of his whereabouts to allow him a stigma free reentry into the community in which she lived.

While the focus of my study was not on the experiences of the children, it is worth noting that the children in this cohort group were minimally affected by their mother's relationship with a man in prison. There was mention of biological children struggling when the father was absent from the home, but otherwise the children in this study seemed to have a good relationship with their mother's husband in prison. A couple of children self reported that they really liked their mother's husband and did not offer any negative opinions on the situation.

Prison wives had no shortage of bad experiences to share and example of difficulties they face regularly. Issues with visitation came up in every conversation and the frustration of trying to maintain an already difficult relationship with additional challenges from the prison's policies related to visits was even more discouraging. Issues with being treated as less than, being made to change clothes, arrive early, drive long distances or wrangle children in the midst of it all described what was one of the most frustrating aspects of this type of relationship. It seems that in the area of visitation, there is much room for improvement and to find a better balance between facility requirements for safety and security with the ability to encourage visitation, which is linked to a more successful reentry when family relationships are maintained.

The other prevalent topic in the interviews was the negative experiences of prison wives that resulted from financial exploitation. Women who were forced to pay exorbitant fees, on top of extremely expensive phone calls and the already increased costs of personal hygiene items spoke at length about their frustrations of running the home, seeing to the needs of the children and then being taken advantage of just by trying to maintain their relationship was a big source of frustration. The single biggest area of complaints came on the topic of the phone calls. For

inmates in federal prisons, the issue wasn't as big because they were limited by minutes per month that they could talk on the phone, however, the exploitation was no less limited otherwise. The companies that are in the middle as the processor of the money sent in to the prisoner often took outrageous cuts of what was sent in or added additional fees for the service that outside of the prison system would be next to free if handled by internet. Women worked hard and organized child care and intricate work schedules to be able to make long drives to visits, often when facilities existed much closer to where they lived compared to where their husbands were sent. The prison wives were frustrated at being forced to pay the for-profit vendors who mark-up food and provide basic hygiene items that are not provided by the prison because the wives had to provide for their husband. It was regularly described that what the men needed for food was insufficient due to the facility not having enough food or because it was subpar or just not enough.

When I asked one participant if she had anything else to add, she said this:

“We shouldn't be treated any differently because we are married to them, we are their best shot at a successful release and isn't that really the goal? Why would people want to make this harder, if he doesn't have my support and the support of his family, and friends, he won't do well and everyone who was whining will be paying for him to go back, his kids will pay the price for him to go back. The system has already set them up to fail, so who wins if people can't just support us?”

Structural and societal difficulties and judgments affect the women, men, and children who are connected to men in prison, but the experiences vary greatly depending on the amount of support they receive. Women who are married to a man in prison have adapted to the routine judgments they experience. They have adapted to the stigma of the relationship and focus on

keeping their relationships protected by choosing how they present themselves and how they manage their identity as a prison wife. While some would blur the line between the factual truth and the acceptable version of it, most women did not lie about their husband's imprisonment without strong reason, often to protect their children. But arguably, there is a societal obligation to respect the choices of these women, regardless of whether or not family, friends, workplace supervisors or community members support their choices.

As the United States prison-industrial complex grows bigger and calls for reform become louder, it is important to consider everyone who is affected by our nation's current system of incarceration. The prison-industrial complex consists of private corporations with political agendas to negotiate "affordable" state contracts to house prisoners within a state for less cost to state budgets. Also a key component of the prison-industrial complex is those who are routinely exploited are the victims of these profit seeking, cost-saving efforts. Corporations with a vested interest in profiting off of a system based on people who are incarcerated inherently cannot also be concerned with limiting the number of people imprisoned or the effects of a prisoner's sentence on his family. Schlosser (1998) defines the prison-industrial complex as, "a set of bureaucratic, political, and economic interests that encourage increased spending on imprisonment, regardless of the actual need." As our current incarceration policies continue to "undermine social control institutions like families and communities" (Lynch & Sabol, p. 3), there is a societal obligation to further examine those groups who are most disproportionately affected (those who are of lower socioeconomic status and/or African-American) in order to address the causes for a disproportionate effect and to look at addressing the effects on an already disadvantaged set of people and their families.

## **Future Research**

The stigma of having a relationship with someone in prison is much a much broader topic than what I have been able to explain in this research. Not developed in this paper were the stigma-effects on the children. Official data is not collected to know the effects on children of having an incarcerated parent. This data would probably be best gathered at the school level and there is no such official way to track this data currently. However, given the suggested number of children affected by a parent's incarceration, this is an area that should be examined as a way to provide support and guidance for children with these unique circumstances. Given the large number of children that are likely affected by a family member in prison, it would be worthwhile to investigate the children's experiences, as well. There may be a need for school-centered activities or support groups to offer the children of incarcerated mothers and fathers additional support as needed.

What I have sought to capture in this study is only the existence and verification of my hypothesis that prison wives feel stigmatized. My study included a small sample size so further study with a larger randomized would yield more generalizable data and conclusions. My data could only lead to speculation as to the success for these women's husbands after they were released, and it would be important to determine how the experiences of the wives and the roles they played in their husband's lives affected their husband's actual experiences. Additionally, there are sociological reasons to offer emotional support to prison wives within our communities to increase family interaction and success in their communities. Looking at what resources are offered within a community such as support groups or outreach to employers to normalize the women's experiences would be important to explore.

Literature shows that maintaining a strong family connection while incarcerated leads to more successful re-entry and lower recidivism. Looking at the policies that exist for inmate location and visitation is vital. Working with local prisons to establish more family friendly visiting policies to maintain the family structure while the inmate is in prison could lead to a more successful family unit upon release. Within this might be to establish how regular visits can be made without significant cost and feelings of stigma in order to positively affect an inmate's behavior and psychological health while he is in prison. Next would be to research whether or not a less stigmatizing experience for the inmate and his family led to a more successful reentry experience (for them all) upon release.

My research showed that prison wives generally had common experiences because of their relationships with a man in prison. However, the study was limited to women with an average age of around 35. It would be important to understand the experiences of prison wives through a wider variety of age groups to establish a support system and better understanding for their needs throughout life. I did not have any responses from anyone older than age 65. This is curious both from a research standpoint as to their experiences, but also as to why I didn't have anyone in this age group who responded for an interview. This could be an issue of technology as I advertised in a social media group that perhaps is not utilized by seniors or it could indicate that there are fewer prison wives in that age bracket. It would be worth researching if the stigma felt by this group if they could be identified. Is the stigma felt less as a person ages with the assumption that their awareness or concern for judgment of others somehow lessens? Do older women seek out or engage differently in these relationships, or are the commitments of the older inmate population in tact because of the years the couple spent together before incarceration?

This study didn't allow for a set of interviews from the general public to establish or verify the stereotypes or stigma perceived by the prison wives. Future in-depth research could include interviews or maybe a survey with non-prison wives and the general public who are not otherwise affiliated with a family member or friend in prison to determine their point of view and to compare their assumptions and their views about prison wives to what is reported by the prison wives themselves. It would be important to research and gather data on the public's perception of prison wives then also to identify if this perception changes post-release.

The women who discussed their professional careers (this was not a specific question that I asked, and could be added to future research on this topic to determine how stigma differed in the workplace based on career) reported feeling most uncomfortable sharing the details with their employer. These women included a teacher, a nurse, and a government employee and they explained that they didn't think their employer would understand. I can assume that with additional workplace/employment capital the assumption of stigma that a woman would feel might increase. This could be studied in further research.

Finally, comparative research could study the different stigmas toward prison wives of other countries, as well as toward prison wives with spouses in private versus state-run prisons here in the U.S.

On a societal level, further research in the area of prison visitation and housing assignments as it relates to policy and subsequently an inmate's success at re-entry should be explored. Further research should be done to explore the area of success both in and out of prison men who have received support, particularly in the area of his marriage, and encouragement to maintain a strong social connection to their family.

Lastly, my research only focused on women who were married to men in prison, however, there could be studies of men who marry women who are serving prison sentences as well as same-gender relationships. Presumably the stigma felt for these relationships would yield different experiences and further areas for research within each of them.

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# Appendix A - Interview Questions

## Demographic Questions

1. What is your age?
2. What is your partner's age?
3. What is your racial/ethnic background?
4. What is his racial/ethnic background?
5. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
6. What is the highest level of education that your partner has completed?
7. What state do you live in?
8. What state does he currently live in?
9. Is he in a private (profit) or state prison?
10. His first name for the purposes of the interview only?

## Interview Questions

Introductory Comments: As you know this study is about the experiences of women married to or in a long-term commitment with a man who is incarcerated. I would like to learn about your experiences and I have some general questions for you. I previously sent you an email that explained my research and how your information will be used, did you have any questions?

*--The purpose of the interview is to gather research data for my master's thesis.*

*--Interviews will be audio and/or video recorded to ensure accuracy, these recordings and all notes will be kept confidential.*

*--Your participation is voluntary and you can withdraw from the study at anytime, though I hope that if you have any concerns, you'll let me know so we can discuss them.*

*--Your personally identifiable data will never be referenced, only aggregate (summary) or info that is referenced as a pseudonym will be used.*

*If you have any questions, please let me know, I'm happy to explain things further.*

1. Tell me what it is like having a partner in prison?
  - a) What's the most difficult part of having a partner in prison?
  - b) What is positive or negative?
  - c) How long have you known your partner?
  - d) How many years completed? Left?
  - e) Has he been in prison before?
  - f) Are you married? If so, for how long?
2. Tell me about your daily life?
  - a) Socially? Economically? Per month?
  - b) Do you structure your day differently?
  - c) Can you tell me a little bit about the routine of visits? How often? Cost?
3. Do you have children?
  - a) How old are they?
  - b) Does having a partner in prison affect them? What is it like for them?

4. Can you give me an example of how being a prison wife changes how you act or present yourself?
  - a) How do you describe your relationship to others: community members, co-workers, family, and friends?
  - b) Example of a negative experience?
  
5. How do you think society perceives prison wives?
  - a) What do you think the stereotype is?
  - b) Have you had negative experiences related to being a prison wife?
  - c) What is the most normal thing about being a prison wife?
  - d) What is the most surprising thing about being a prison wife?
  
6. Do you have a particular story you'd like to share?
  
7. Do you know of other prison wives who may be interested in speaking with me about their experiences?
  
8. Is there anything else that I've not covered that you'd like to share with me?