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'Buffers' against crime? Exploring the roles and limitations of positive relationships among women in prison

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Women in Prison

A considerable amount of research focuses on the detrimental influence that relationships pose for women offenders while relatively little attention has been given to the potential positive impact of relationships in their lives. This study investigates how women offenders' positive relationships work as "buffers" against their criminal involvement, as well as why some positive influences do not elicit long-term change in women. We examine various forms of relationships (both romantic and non-romantic) that female offenders develop and explore the mechanisms by which these relationships might influence their behavior. Life history interviews conducted with 60 incarcerated women revealed that women's family members, friends, significant others, and children provided support, social capital, motivation, and opportunities which can buffer women from criminal behavior, but that women's drug use, disadvantage, interest in, pride or shame, and desire to make positive changes limited the effectiveness of these relationships.

Keywords: Women offenders; Relationships; Social Support; Incarceration; Reentry

Relational problems have been widely cited as reasons women are involved in crime, with many scholars arguing that women's relationships with criminal others play a critical role in either pushing them into crime or maintaining their involvement in crime over time (McDonald et al., 2006, Chesney-Lind and Shelden, 2004, Richie, 1996). For instance, abuse suffered at an early age at the hands of family members or acquaintances has been suggested as an instigator to running away, early delinquency, later sexual promiscuity, and later victimization among females (Chesney-Lind, 2000, Chesney-Lind, 2002). Victimization within an intimate partnership may promote substance use (Kilpatrick et al., 1997), attachment difficulties, and later violence among women (Greenfeld and Snell, 1999, Harlow, 1999). Dysfunctional, problematic, or abusive relationships with significant others increase the likelihood of criminal behavior among women (Van Voorhis et al., 2010, Salisbury and Van Voorhis, 2009) and having criminal friends is a consistent predictor of crime among males and females alike (Gendreau et al., 1996, Dowden and Andrews, 1999). Simply put, maintaining relationships with "bad" people appears to increase the likelihood of "bad," delinquent, antisocial, or criminal behavior among women.

Alternatively, relatively little attention has been given to the potential *positive* impact of relationships in women offenders' lives (e.g., Leverentz, 2006). Given that negative relationships can have detrimental effects on women, it is certainly possible that positive relationships with others may be important *protective* factors for female offenders. Indeed, Leverentz (2006) reported that prosocial romantic partners who supported women offenders' non-criminal behavior effectively changed women's routine activities toward non-crime, and provided emotional and financial support that contributed to their desistance. Leverentz's important work merits more consideration, particularly in terms of the impact that different types of relationships (e.g., significant others, friends, or family members) have on female offenders' criminal behavior

– her research suggests that we should look more closely at those relationships that are helpful, supportive, and crime-*in*hibiting. The current research takes steps to understand this issue more fully and builds upon Leverentz's work by examining various forms of relationships (both romantic and non-romantic) that female offenders develop and the ways in which these relationships might reduce their criminal behavior (e.g., by providing emotional support, motivation, etc).

Our data on women in prison also provides a unique opportunity to explore the types of relationships that women offenders identify as positive influences in their lives and garner from their perspective how or why these relationships were beneficial, as well as why some of these relationships did not lead to desistance. While a considerable amount of contemporary research focuses on the detrimental influence relationships can pose for women, we believe the current research contributes to our understanding of the potential positive impact that relationships can have in women's lives, as well as why, in some cases, they may fail to yield these benefits.

Buffers against Crime: Relationships that Build Social Capital, Provide Support, Serve as Catalysts for Change, and Alter Opportunities for Crime

Women offenders, especially in the United States, have been described as marginalized members of society who suffer from poverty, substance dependence, victimization, and various health-related problems (e.g., mental health, depression, anxiety, etc.) (Bloom et al., 2003, Owen and Bloom, 1995). Scholars have noted that many times, women offenders' crimes are committed as a response to, a reason for, or an element of relationships with other people – for instance, as violence against an abusive family member or significant other (Hardyman and Van Voorhis, 2004, McDaniels-Wilson and Belknap, 2008), as monetary or property crime (e.g.,

forgery or fraud) committed in an effort to provide for young children (e.g., Mumola, 2000), or as part of being in an intimate relationship (e.g., drug use or drug dealing within the relationship) (Brown, 2006, Carbone-Lopez and Kruttschnitt, 2010). Thus, relationships may be a particularly important consideration when examining female offending.

However, we believe that not all relationships for women offenders are criminogenic, or crime-promoting. Given previous research on women offenders, it seems likely that there are several mechanisms by which relationships might positively impact their lives. Borrowing from various scholars' work on women offenders (e.g., Gilligan, 1982, Giordano et al., 2002, Leverentz, 2006, O'Brien, 2001), we speculate that connections with others may reduce women's criminal behavior by providing social support, building social capital, intrinsically motivating, and altering women's opportunities for crime. We draw from several lines of theory and research to support our contention that positive relationships with others can act as "buffers" against women's criminal behavior. From social capital theory (Portes, 1998), we posit that the relationships women maintain with others can foster supportive networks and link them to resources (e.g., jobs, babysitters) that help them to stay out of trouble (see also O'Brien, 2001, Reisig et al., 2002). It seems likely that, given female offenders' often marginalized status (Owen and Bloom, 1995) combined with their primary caregiver responsibilities (Mumola, 2000, Brown and Bloom, 2009), they would benefit from receiving instrumental, financial, and emotional support. Thus, family members, friends, and significant others who provide functional services such as childcare, transportation, or safe housing, or who connect them to other resources (e.g., employment, domestic violence shelters) and prosocial networks may protect them from turning to crime to satisfy those needs, at least temporarily.

Further, emotional and moral support have been identified by women offenders as important motivators to change their behavior (Cobbina, 2009, 2010, O'Brien, 2001). Recent research by Giordano and her colleagues (2002, 2007) suggests that emotional connections with others may facilitate cognitive transformations and serve as catalysts for behavioral change. These emotional connections may inhibit criminal behavior by increasing the likelihood that women latch onto the "hooks for change" (Giordano et al., 2002) in their lives, or from a control theory perspective (Hirschi, 1969, Laub and Sampson, 2003, Sampson and Laub, 1993), such connections may provide incentives for women to refrain from crime because they fear damaging the quality of the relationship (i.e., bond). Indeed, some women have noted that avoiding disappointing their family members helped them change their behavior (Brown and Bloom, 2009, Dodge and Pogrebin, 2001), while others have suggested that continuing in a life of crime is incompatible with their moral obligations to their family (e.g., to make a better life for their children, see Giordano et al., 2002). Further, relationships that carry with them positive emotional connections, such as love or affection, can arouse changes in offenders' self-perceptions and evoke more optimistic definitions of themselves (Giordano et al., 2007). These cognitive changes, in turn, may elicit prosocial behavioral changes: women may begin to redefine themselves in a more positive light, such as in relation to other people (e.g., their children) as opposed to their past behaviors (e.g., crime, Huebner et al., 2010), they may come to view themselves as more worthy of desirable outcomes (e.g., a loving relationship with a significant other, see Giordano et al., 2007), or they may begin to understand the consequences of their behaviors from their new perspective as a "mother," "spouse," or "caretaker" (e.g., doing drugs may impede caregiving abilities, see Giordano et al., 2002, O'Brien, 2001). This is very similar to relational theory, which also suggests that a woman's identity is shaped and defined by the

quality of relationships she has with others (Gilligan, 1982, Miller, 1976). The high rate at which

women offenders are victimized by others (Browne et al., 1999, McDaniels-Wilson and Belknap,

2008) has often been linked to their low conceptions of self-worth, depression and other mental

health problems, substance use, and violence against others (Covington, 2000, Messina et al.,

2007, Salisbury and Van Voorhis, 2009); given these linkages, it is plausible that *positive*

relationships with others may serve as incentives to make positive changes in their lives or they

may provide a prosocial (i.e., non-criminal) identity for women (Huebner et al., 2010, Giordano

et al., 2002).

Finally, we believe that relationships with others may change women's opportunity structures

and routine activities (Leverentz, 2006, Cohen and Felson, 1979) regarding crime. In particular,

relationships may reduce women's opportunities for crime and increase their opportunities for

prosocial activities by changing their access to systems or institutions such as family,

community, church, school, or work. For instance, a woman's friend or relative may help her

gain access to employment, and her involvement in a new job might diminish the amount of free

time she has to spend with negative associates who provide opportunities or exposure to risky or

criminal activities. This point of view is consistent with Horney et al.'s (1995) notion of local life

circumstances, where even short-term relationships may be beneficial in redirecting women's

criminal behavior to non-criminal behavior. Further, if these relationships provide avenues for

female offenders to develop new, prosocial contacts and be reinforced for positive behaviors

over criminal behaviors (Burgess and Akers, 1966), they may be more successful at eliciting

longer-term change among women (Giordano et al., 2002). Female offenders may also become

less involved in criminal behavior because of the roles they fulfill and the routine activities that

follow from those roles – for example, by acting as the primary caregiver role for either their

children or other family members, women's activities may involve working more and staying home at night instead of going out with friends who engage in crime.

In all of the ways discussed here, relationships with others may reduce women's need, desire, and opportunity to engage in crime, and we use these theoretical perspectives to guide our study. Our study is certainly not the first to examine these mechanisms among women, but we do believe that women's reflections on their choices, behaviors, and motivations from prison can inform our understanding of incarcerated women in general. Thus, we explore these possibilities throughout this study, and provide examples from women offenders' perspectives about how their relationships with others were beneficial to them and how they may have served as temporary "buffers" against their criminality. Women offenders are certainly not a homogeneous group, however, and despite having some helpful relationships with others, women in our sample nonetheless continued to engage in criminal behavior, some more so than others. Therefore, we also explore the possible reasons that their positive relationships failed to evoke long-term change; obtaining this sort of information from incarcerated women may be particularly insightful. In doing so, our study contributes to the overall understanding of how relationships with others can positively impact women offenders' behavior, as well as the limitations of those relationships.

Data and Methods

This study uses qualitative data collected as a part of a larger study examining women's gendered pathways to crime (DeHart, 2008) with a sample of women incarcerated in a maximum security prison in the Southeastern region of the United States. It is important to note that this study therefore cannot provide evidence regarding how relationships may affect desistance, since the women involved in this study were incarcerated at the time of data collection and thus did not

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desist from crime. However, our data do allow us to better understand women's perspectives of the positive influences in their lives.

At the time of sampling, the prospective pool of female inmates numbered 465 women. It was determined that women within 60 days of entry, those with severe mental health problems, those housed in segregation for disciplinary infractions, and those under 18 years old not be considered for the study, leaving 203 inmates from which to sample. Prospective participants were randomly selected from the eligible pool using the prison's searchable database, and women were provided the opportunity to participate until the final sample size of 60 women was reached (90 percent participation rate). This large, qualitative sample size (Lee and Fielding, 1996, Swanson, 1968) provides an opportunity for a very detailed and insightful look into the dynamics of relationships in these women's lives.

The qualitative data provided here were collected through life history interviews which lasted approximately 2 hours for each woman. Prompts addressed issues including home and family life while growing up, intimate relationships, substance use, criminal histories, turning points, and supports and buffers. With regard to the latter, the primary prompt was "Was there anything or anyone in your life that led you away from trouble, protected you, or helped you?" Because audio taping was prohibited within the prison, interview responses were captured via shorthand-style field notes (Emerson et al., 1995) and transcribed by the interviewer immediately following each interview. Data analyses were conducted using Atlas/ti qualitative software and a grounded-theory approach (Strauss, 1987). Because the approach does not use predetermined categories for data coding, and rigorous analyses necessitate "promiscuous" coding rather than mutually exclusive categories, we followed a qualitative rather than quantitative tradition for data integrity (e.g., checks against multiple data sources versus intercoder reliability analyses; Sanjek, 1990,

Kirk and Miller, 1986, Glaser and Strauss, 1967). For the current study, we focused our thematic analyses on certain coding categories identified within the original dataset (e.g., buffers, supports); within these categories, we examined patterns of responses among the women in our sample and performed analyses within those segments.

As demonstrated in table 1, the women in our study are similar to other incarcerated female offenders across the U.S. (Greenfeld and Snell, 1999). The median age of women in our sample was 31 years old and race was evenly distributed. Less than half of the women graduated from high school and most had at least one child. Their offenses were varied, including violent (e.g., murder, manslaughter, robbery), nonviolent (e.g., forgery, burglary, shoplifting), drug-related (e.g., distribution, driving under the influence), child maltreatment (e.g., child neglect), and other forms of crime (e.g., arson, grand larceny). Table 2 highlights the larger context of the participants' lives. Women in our study recounted stories of abuse, drug use, poverty, and violence within their lives prior to incarceration. Many were mistreated, abused, and/or sexually exploited at early ages. Most women were exposed to violent, drug-using, or disorganized and chaotic living situations in their childhood homes – they shared stories of parental domestic violence, and often endured sexual abuse at the hands of family members (typically uncles, brothers, and male cousins). One woman even noted that abuse was so prevalent and commonplace that she came to "expect [it] out of life." Many women told us that they tried to leave their childhood home as soon as possible (e.g., "I couldn't wait to leave that house;" "caught the first thing smokin' and went to the city"). Unfortunately, however, the majority of the women's situations did not change after they left. In fact, most endured abuse, violence, poverty, drug use, and conflict in their adult homes. They related stories of abuse, intimidation, rape, drug use, and tension in their relationships with significant others and family members.

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Further, the women in our sample described living in poverty and shared stories of prostitution, selling drugs, and "getting with" certain people (e.g., Johns, drug dealers, etc.) in order to have or make money. Still, however, these women - approximately 75 percent of our participants - identified positive buffers in their lives: of these, approximately 37 percent came from family, 18 percent were provided by friends, 10 percent by romantic significant others, and 33 percent from children.

(Table 1 about Here)

Although the purpose of the larger study was to understand the role of victimization in women's pathways to crime, our focus in the current investigation was on the protective factors, or "buffers," that women identified as people in their lives who were, at times, positive influences for them. In essence, we asked women to identify and discuss the people in their lives upon whom they could rely for support, help, or encouragement, and at times, women provided information regarding why they did not "latch on" (Giordano et al., 2002) to these people. Four distinct but related themes emerged from our analyses. For the women in our study, positive[1] relationships: a) provided access to social capital; b) offered various types of needed support; c) motivated them to avoid circumstances, people, or behaviors associated with their criminal lifestyle; and d) altered their opportunities to engage in crime. These themes will be discussed within the context of the relationships in which they occur, and when possible, we describe women's subjective perceptions of why positive influences failed to evoke long-term change for them.

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[1] For our purposes here, we refer to positive relationships as those which the women identified as helpful at some point in their lives. Therefore, we do not limit our examination only to women's relationships with prosocial, or non-criminal, others. As will be demonstrated, some women in our sample identified their relationships with criminal others as "positive" because, at least for a time, these people were encouraging, supportive, or otherwise helpful to them (even if their own behavior was negative or antisocial). Alternatively, some women also identified relationships with "prosocial" others as very negative experiences, or those which pushed them towards crime. For these reasons, we will refer to relationships which, from our participants' perspectives, encouraged their non-criminal behavior, as "positive" throughout the remainder of this study.

(Table 2 about Here)

Results and Discussion

Relationships with Family Members

Families were the largest contributors of positive influences reported among our participants, with 37 percent of women reporting that their family members were "buffers." Overall, women described that their family members provided emotional, instrumental, and financial support. Female offenders have cited their family's love and attachment as factors that help them stay away from a life of crime (Cobbina, 2009, 2010, O'Brien, 2001) – such connections provide moral support and encouragement, and suggest that women's family will support them despite difficult circumstances. Barbara,[2] a 52 year-old Caucasian woman convicted of murdering her husband who repeatedly abused her, told us that her grandmother was emotionally supportive:

> Barbara's grandmother was a support…Barbara could always talk to her for a good word. Her grandmother would tell her to stay out of trouble. She was supportive - Barbara always felt better about herself after talking to her grandmother. She was Barbara's self-esteem. When Barbara was at her lowest, she could talk to her grandmother, and Barbara would feel better about herself and be able to cope with whatever was going on.

Barbara admitted that after her grandmother died, she "didn't turn to anybody else" for support to help her cope with physical and sexual abuse from her first husband. This is noteworthy, since Barbara told us that she "didn't go for help…she stayed in the situation she was in – abuse" with her second husband, which ultimately lead to her incarceration.

Family members may also provide important instrumental forms of support that female offenders need in order to refrain from crime. It has been suggested that family members provide advice to female offenders regarding how to secure a job and how to stay away from crime (Mills and Codd, 2008), and women often report that family members provide free childcare or

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[2] Women were given pseudonyms throughout this study to protect their identity.

offer a safe place to live while they get on their feet (Brown and Bloom, 2009, O'Brien, 2001). Carrie (29 years old, African American, child neglect) credited her sister for helping her out numerous times while she was using drugs and as things "kept getting worse" for her – she lived with her sister after being evicted from her apartment as well as after she was released from drug treatment. At the time of her incarceration, Carrie was "involved in a lot of drugs" and could not adequately take care of her three children. She is now especially grateful to her sister for watching over her children during these difficult times:

> Carrie's sister pulled her out of a lot of trouble, which Carrie never realized until she was locked up. Carrie's sister always took care of the kids – they would have gone to a foster home earlier if it weren't for her sister.

Other women in our sample reported that family members indirectly or directly intervened to help them leave drugs, violent circumstances, or other high-risk situations. Although these changes were temporary, they afforded women with opportunities for long-term change (such as breaking up with a boyfriend or enrolling in a treatment program). For instance, Betty, a 38 year-old African American burglary offender, reported that she left her violent boyfriend and lived with her parents during her pregnancy because she knew she would not use drugs while living with her mother:

> Betty just left and went home to her momma (so she wouldn't smoke). She stayed with her momma while she was pregnant. She got straight, got an apartment, got herself situated…she was going to leave [her boyfriend].

Tara (27 years old, Caucasian, shoplifting) also recalled a time when her mother helped her escape a very abusive relationship with a boyfriend:

> Tara was pregnant with his child and didn't want to do any more drugs. One day, he pushed Tara across the room and she fell against a dresser – this was while she was 6 months pregnant. Then he smacked her. Tara called her mother and said "I gotta get out of here." She was to that point that she was going to kill herself if she touched more drugs – she didn't want to hurt her son or have him born addicted. Tara's mom came and got her…Tara left everything…and never dated [that boyfriend] again.

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Although these relationships were beneficial at the time, women's relationships with family members were quite often conflicted, corrupting, or exploitative. Barbara was raped by her uncle when she was 12 years old, Carrie grew up in a sexually abusive household around drug use and with very little adult supervision, Betty's relationship with her mother and father was characterized by very little "closeness," and Tara portrayed her abusive relationship (where she was often the aggressor) with her mother as "awful." Nonetheless, these women were still able to identify instances where their family "came through" for them in one way or another; their accounts indicate that regardless of the difficult and sometimes tenuous nature of women's relationships with others, they may still benefit from those connections.

Most of the women in our sample reported monetary hardships, with some resorting to robbery, burglary, prostitution, selling drugs, or "getting with" drug dealers, bosses, husbands, or "sugar daddies" in order to make money or live a certain type of lifestyle. In some cases, financial support regarding even the most basic items such as food or clothing may prevent women from turning to crime to satisfy those needs (Cobbina, 2009, O'Brien, 2001). Sylvia indicated that after almost 5 months of living in hotels and shelters waiting to get into a drug treatment program, her sister and friend came to help:

> [They] came and took her to a hotel and bought her some food. The next day they took her to the bus station and bought her a ticket back to her home city. Sylvia went back and lived with her mom.

Women in our sample were also motivated to change their behavior because of their relationships with family members. Family members may be important in instilling beliefs, self-efficacy, and social or human capital within women, all of which may be related to reduced criminal activity (Salisbury and Van Voorhis, 2009). Indeed, women in our study frequently noted that their obligations to or investment in relationships with family members often provided reasons for them to behave more prosocially and improve their lives. Joan (41 years old,

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Caucasian, homicide by child abuse) ran a home daycare where two children died, and summed

up the effect her family had on her behavior in this way:

> …it all goes back to trying to please people that you care about…it keeps you focused. If you care about your family and love them, you aren't going to put yourself in a position to have yourself taken away from them.

Joan's statements suggest that caring relationships with family members and others may be

important enough to keep women from engaging in crime (so as not to damage those

relationships). During her interview, she also highlighted the role of spirituality in her life (see

Giordano et al., 2008), something she credited her family with teaching her and which she

identified as a "strength." Joan reported that she continues to receive letters of support and

encouragement from members of her childhood church; thus, she appears to continue to benefit

from the social capital her family helped build with their church congregation.

Josie (27 years old, African American, shoplifting) was also motivated to change her

behavior because of her emotional connections with her family members. She recalled having a

conversation with her sister that inspired her to seek treatment for her crack cocaine addiction:

> One thing that made things click for Josie was when she called her sister on her [Josie's] birthday…Her sister said, "I never thought I'd hear from you on this day-I thought maybe you'd be dead." This woke Josie up. Josie said "come and get me, I want to stay with you, I want to go to rehab."

Women also reported that they were motivated to change their behaviors because they did

not want to "disappoint" certain family members. Nicole, a 30 year-old African American drug

offender, recalled that she used to skip school in the 7th grade to ride around in stolen cars, but

she "didn't want to do it too regular because she didn't want to get caught and be bad in her

grandma's eyes." Again, this attests to the multifaceted nature of family relationships and how

families can exert positive, negative, or contradictory influences on social behavior.

In some cases, obligations to their family members, such as providing care to their ill parents, also reduced their opportunities for crime and inspired them to avoid trouble:

> …taking care of her [Amber (28 years old, Caucasian, robbery)] mom also helped her stay off pills some. Her mom had smoked for years and had to be on oxygen, was in really bad health…seeing that, and also just having to take care of her, that made Amber lay off the pills some.

Other women did not appear to be intrinsically motivated to refrain from criminal behavior, but they admitted that their reduced opportunity for crime was in part or wholly attributable to their relationships with family members. For instance, Latisha (23 years old, African American, manslaughter) indicated that spending time with her family reduced her opportunities to engage in crime when she was younger, noting that she was "sheltered" and "didn't have time to get in trouble," and Chantelle (24 years old, African American, robbery) noted that rules at her aunt's house also prohibited her from using drugs and getting into trouble:

> She [Chantelle] would sneak and do drugs…she still wanted to do alcohol and party, but she knew she couldn't do that at her aunt's. Soon she moved in with her cousin and began drinking and doing crack every day.

Chantelle's account highlights the importance of being receptive to the "hooks for change" (Giordano et al., 2002) that are available in their lives; in her case, Chantelle was unwilling to change her drug habits (she began using crack cocaine at 13 years old), despite her aunt's best efforts to curtail those behaviors. Similarly, Patricia (35 years old, African American, drug offense), recognized the support and encouragement that her own aunt offered, but suggested that she was not as open or receptive to receiving it:

> Patricia's aunt has always led her away from drugs. The aunt is always there, and Patricia knows the aunt loves her and wants the best for her, has her best interests in mind. They don't get along because Patricia doesn't listen to the aunt. The aunt tells her stuff she's already told her before.

Unfortunately, her aunt's support was not enough to overcome Patricia's unwillingness to change (Giordano et al., 2002), as she admitted to being "mixed up with drugs…got stabbed and

almost died" prior to her incarceration as a result of her crack cocaine addiction. Women's receptivity to positive relationships is an important consideration for our understanding of the potential positive influences in women offender's lives – positive influences may be present, as demonstrated in our sample, but they may co-exist with negative influences, and some women may be unable or unwilling to take advantage of them, and thus cannot benefit from them.

Relationships with Friends and Peers

While it appears that having criminal associates is a risk factor for female offenders (Simourd and Andrews, 1994), maintaining relationships with prosocial peers, on the other hand, may be crime inhibiting. It is possible that positive friendships could provide support, unite female offenders with other prosocial people, link them to prosocial opportunities or activities, or serve as role models or "blueprints" (Giordano et al., 2002, Giordano et al., 2008) for change. Prosocial friends may also encourage women to leave an abusive situation, or they may support her when she wants to receive treatment for substance abuse or mental health problems. Thelma, a 45-year old self-described drug addict convicted of shoplifting, told us that it helps her to stay away from drugs when she has a "support system of clean buddies." Friends may also directly intervene to reduce women's drug use, as in Sylvia's case:

> [Sylvia's friend] didn't know that Sylvia was doing crack, as she never did it at the house. [Her friend] found out because … someone … told her that Sylvia was doing crack. [Sylvia's friend] started watching Sylvia and told Sylvia's mother about it.

Women's friendship and peer networks can also motivate them to change their behavior, or as Giordano et al. (2002, 2008) suggest, they may provide "blueprints" on how to change or how to behave in prosocial ways. Patricia, for instance, found inspiration to lead a more "normal" life from her friend:

Another friend who just got married has been an inspiration to Patricia. While Patricia was out getting high, the friend got a house and a new car and goes to church and has a baby. The friend tells her how much different life is now. Her friend always told her to get a job and not to sell drugs.

Patricia's friend serves as a sort of role model for how to behave in traditionally prosocial ways (e.g., marriage, attend church), and the potential benefits of that behavior (e.g., new house, new car, baby). Patricia also indicated that although she and her friends used drugs together in the past, they were now getting "clean" at the same time, too; thus, her peer network was an important part of her life, both in criminal and noncriminal ways:

Her buddies in school are still the buds she hangs with now. They were all into the same things together and have moved through life that way. They all started doing weed together, then crack, now they are all clean together. None of them get high now, some are marrying, having babies. They are all settling down together.

Given the extant literature regarding women offenders (O'Brien, 2001, Reisig et al., 2002, Salisbury and Van Voorhis, 2009), it is possible that relationships with prosocial networks may occupy time in prosocial ways as well as foster connections to other prosocial contacts, systems, or institutions, or that friends might help with increasing social capital among women by linking them with prosocial activities and networks. For instance, Sylvia noted that one of the main things that helped her stay "clean" was staying busy; this could presumably occur within the context of positive peer networks or community events. Unfortunately, however, it was not apparent among the women we talked to that their friends helped them build positive social capital. Future research might consider whether building social capital is an aspect that is deficient in all women offenders' lives.

Many women instead associated friendships with negative influences and cited the *absence* of friends as one thing that kept them out of trouble (see also Giordano et al., 2002). Grace (41 years old, African American, arson), for example, mentioned that staying to herself and never

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having any close friends helped keep her out of trouble, and Josie noted that she would distance herself from others she saw as "troublemakers." Although we did not examine the possibility in the current study, one potential problem may be that when women distance themselves from negative associates, they are unable to fill the void left behind with new prosocial associates and networks.

Finally, our conversations with women offenders revealed that even when beneficial ties to others are available, various factors outside of the relationship may impact whether or not they utilized those relationships to turn away from crime. This is evident for Patricia, who noted that although her friends encouraged her to leave a very violent situation with her boyfriend, she did not listen because she was using drugs, and "kept going back." Giordano et al. (2008) note that the immediacy of certain circumstances or situations, such as drug use, violence, or disadvantage, may outweigh the potential effect of the positive relationship. Thus, women may have some positive people in their lives that influence their behaviors, but these effects may be overcome or consumed by the more numerous, perhaps more proximate, negative influences in their lives.

Relationships with Significant Others and Romantic Partners

Much research to date has focused on the crime-producing effects of females' relationships with significant others. In this context, it has been suggested that women may be physically, emotionally, or sexually abused at the hands of their intimate partners, or that significant others foster criminal behavior by involving women in criminal activity or by promoting their drug use (Owen and Bloom, 1995, Bloom et al., 2003). Certainly, the women in our sample related many stories about poor-quality, violence- and drug-involved relationships with significant others: for

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instance, Brenda (46 years old, Caucasian, manslaughter) stabbed her husband after he kidnapped her, tied her to the bed, raped her, and beat her for several hours until she was unconscious and severely injured. Other women shared similar stories of abuse and exploitation by partners as well as co-offending with these partners.

It is also possible, however, that intimate partners may invoke change for the better by promoting women's independence from drugs, encouraging them to attend treatment for mental health problems or drug dependency, or providing basic financial security (Leverentz, 2006). Some scholars also suggest that relationships with prosocial significant others can instill in women a desire to turn away from crime and help them redefine their perspective in life – through their connections with their partner, women may come to believe that they are more worthy of love and affection as well as other positive outcomes (Giordano et al., 2007, Leverentz, 2006). Their partner may also provide reinforcement for changed behavior and serve as an "emotional role model" (Giordano et al., 2007) throughout the change process. For instance, Thelma is a drug addict and is HIV positive as a result of being raped. She described her emotional battles with the diseases but mentioned that her current boyfriend has been very supportive throughout:

> Thelma is in a relationship now. He is good and they've been together for about 2 years…[current boyfriend] has been very supportive and accompanies her to doctors' appointments…Now her strengths include the support of her boyfriend, her Bible study, and her friends in prison. She also knows it's always going to be a battle for her not to use drugs. She doesn't know if she would ever be interested in a man who was unfamiliar with the type of uphill battle she constantly faces. She thinks she needs to date only people who are former addicts, people with a lot of clean time under their belts.

Although she does not elaborate, we might infer that dating ex-addicts who have "a lot of clean time under their belts" may be one way that Thelma's boyfriends model successful (e.g., drug-free) behavior for her (Giordano et al., 2007). Similarly, Anna's (36 years old, Caucasian, assault

and battery) story may indicate that her husband made her feel like a more worthy person; she had a long history of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse from her family members and acquaintances, and "held it all in" in part by abusing alcohol. Anna noted that after drinking every day for about a year, she "put it all down and hasn't had a drink since" because her husband "told her she didn't need it."

Significant others may also provide the economic and social stability that many females fail to achieve alone. In Brenda's case, her previous marriage was "good" because it was a "normal family relationship – the same she saw with her parents" (who were nonviolent and "happy"). Although Brenda and her second husband occasionally smoked marijuana, she indicated that her roles as mother and spouse were fulfilling, and she saw no need to bury problems or alter her perceptions with other substances:

> They [Brenda and her husband] both worked, both took care of the house and kids. They also took care of his mother and aunt…they had cookouts…she had things to look forward to. There was no need to alter her perception, like drugs and alcohol do.

Maintaining relationships with significant others may also directly or indirectly alter women's opportunities to engage in crime. Tara told us about a previous (non-abusive) boyfriend who directly influenced her behavior because he "gave her an ultimatum of it was him or the drugs – she had to give up one." Although Tara did not quit smoking marijuana while with this boyfriend, she did quit using crack cocaine and prescription pills at his urging. Tara's excerpt corroborates Blanchette and Brown's (2006) suggestion that females may avoid engaging in criminal behavior to avoid harming their relationships with others. Unfortunately, the majority of women in our sample did not mention that significant others evoked an internal desire to change their behavior. Dawn (28 years old, Caucasian, burglary) explained a situation with her first

husband, where her behavior was influenced positively (in that she did not use drugs often), but the relationship failed to invoke *internal* motivation or incentive to change:

> Dawn turned 16, she was with her first husband and wasn't allowed to do anything – he wouldn't let her. He might drink every once in a while and she just might – MIGHT – be able to have one. Sometimes he'd let her smoke a little pot, but it wasn't often or regular.

The stories provided by women in our sample support the notion that romantic relationships *may*, in fact, reduce women's criminal behavior, but it was admittedly difficult to find many positive romantic relationships among our sample (only 10 percent of women identified significant others as a "buffer"). In general, the women's narratives indicate that their partner's influence on their behavior is likely contingent upon at least two things: a) the woman's receptivity or motivation to change (see Giordano et al., 2002), and b) the partner's own prosocial or antisocial behaviors. For instance, Jessica (29 years old, Caucasian, lewd act on child), related a story where she left a boyfriend who was "supportive, good looking, strong, down to earth, and stable" because she "didn't want stability—it was boring." Dawn's husband (who did not allow her to use drugs or alcohol) was, in her words, "a psycho" who pressured her into becoming an escort at the age of 18. He eventually became abusive, and Dawn began smoking crack cocaine and "trading sex for crack." Narratives from women in our sample largely did not evince examples of drastic reform stemming from women's romantic relationships. However, there were indications that having supportive and non-criminal partners would be a facilitating condition for change – that is, if (and when) women are ready to change, they may be more likely to turn away from crime when they are in a relationship with a prosocial partner. Unfortunately, such positive relationships are either overlooked in much research or characterize so few women offenders' lives that we often fail to notice their presence or potential impact.

Relationships with Children

Although research has demonstrated a link between parental stress and crime (Ross et al., 2004, Van Voorhis et al., 2010), children may also provide incentive for females to turn away from criminal lifestyles. In fact, a very consistent theme among our study participants reflected their desire to get out of crime for the sake of their children. Giordano and her colleagues (2002) suggest that children are more likely to play an indirect, rather than a direct, role in changing women's criminal behavior. Indeed, very few of the women in our sample indicated that their children served as buffers to their criminal behavior by providing social support or capital; instead, it appeared that children primarily motivated them to turn away from crime and limited their opportunities to engage in crime.

Some scholars suggest that female offenders who successfully renegotiate their roles in life from 'criminal' to 'mother' are more likely to successfully turn away from crime (Cobbina, 2009, Dodge and Pogrebin, 2001, O'Brien, 2001). For some of the women in our sample, being pregnant or having dependent children indeed motivated them to change or remove themselves from risky situations or settings, at least temporarily – women cited reasons that included personal or human agency (Laub and Sampson, 2003) – they chose to disengage from crime in order to be a good mother and good role model for their children, to make their children proud (not disappoint them), and to be able to provide emotionally or financially for their children. For instance, Thelma "wanted to be clean for herself so that she could be somebody for her daughter," while Nicole wanted a better life for her daughter than she had growing up, and this seemed to keep her away from more extensive criminal behavior:

> When Nicole got pregnant it was a turning point for the better. She's doing 5 years, but she'd probably be doing 50 if she hadn't gotten pregnant – she would have maybe killed someone or gotten into bigger stuff (crime). Nicole's

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daughter made her see a lot. Nicole wanted to do for her daughter what folks didn't do for Nicole growing up.

Although having her daughter incited some positive changes in her life, Nicole did not find her roles as "mother" and "drug dealer" incompatible (she used drug money to buy things for her baby), which may explain why her long-term criminal behavior did not change as a result of motherhood (see Giordano et al., 2002):

> When Nicole was 23, she stopped lots of what she was doing (in terms of crime) – when she had her first child. She stopped hanging around that crowd and they sort of drifted away. She was still selling drugs, but she was using the money to buy baby stuff. She got a house – a quiet little place – and didn't let anyone know where she stayed. She was focusing on her daughter.

Women also reported that they simply had fewer opportunities to engage in crime due to their responsibilities as a mother and some also reported that they would rather focus on and spend time with their children than use drugs, steal cars, and so forth. For instance, Tammy (23 years old, Caucasian, child neglect) reported that she "had to watch the young'uns and had to go to work, so she couldn't do drugs and drink all the time." Likewise, Irene (45 years old, African American, drug offense) said that "things shut down" after she had her child because her grandmother "wasn't going to babysit unless [Irene] had a good reason to leave the house."

In some cases, pregnancy reduced women's drug use, at least temporarily. Tara, for instance, stopped smoking cigarettes and doing drugs (especially crack cocaine) when she found out she was pregnant, and Angela (26 years old, African American, burglary) told us that her children were "the only thing" that helped her quit using drugs, since she "stopped completely when she was pregnant, except a little bit of pot." Unfortunately, as noted by Brown (2006) and others (e.g., Giordano et al., 2002), many times being a mother is simply not enough to outweigh the other criminogenic effects (e.g., drug use) in women's lives: Tara slipped back into smoking crack cocaine and shoplifting a few years after her child was born and Angela was again dealing

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"rock cocaine" before she was incarcerated. Joyce's (28 years old, Caucasian, manslaughter) story below highlights the environmental influences that can overshadow the positive aspects of being a mother (or, similarly, other positive influences). Our participants seemed particularly likely to cite drug use as one such negative influence:

> Joyce's oldest two children helped pull her away from trouble some – they were her motive for everything…until the crack had her. Crack will make you take milk from your own baby.

Although the narratives here are consistent with previous research which suggests that becoming a mother can be a positive experience in women's lives and can help them to desist from crime (Brown and Bloom, 2009), unfortunately, this changed behavior may be only temporary (Brown, 2006), as the mothers mentioned above relapsed or recidivated (thus leading to their incarceration). The women we talked to certainly seemed to understand the positive aspects of having children and the value of being a "good mother," but for those who were heavily using drugs prior to their incarceration, these factors were not powerful enough to overcome addiction, as they were simply not as important as ensuring that they would be able to get high once again. Joyce told us, simply, that "drugs make you do a lot of things" that you might not normally do (she killed her friend while she was "severely on crack" because he would not give her money). Nonetheless, that the women we interviewed consistently identified their children as positive influences in their lives and were willing to work to stay out of trouble "for them" demonstrates that children can be an important motivator in women's lives and can help them discontinue criminal involvement over time.

Conclusions

The narratives we have provided here suggest that women's relationships with others can be positive influences on their behavior. Our findings indicate that women's family members,

friends, significant others, and children may provide support, capital, and motivation that reduce women's need, desire, and opportunity to engage in crime. While previous scholarship has identified these as potential buffering mechanisms of criminal behavior, our study explored them in-depth and further specified the ways in which positive relationships may be limited in their capacity to reduce criminal behavior. Some women utilized positive relationships with others to make real changes in their lives (e.g., to stay clean), others "used" these relationships to get what they wanted (e.g., money), and others were simply not interested in taking advantage of prosocial opportunities in their lives.

Based on our discussions with the women in our study, we speculate that at least two conditions need to be met in order for relationships with prosocial others to positively influence women's behaviors: first, such relationships must be present or available in women's lives, and second, women must be receptive to utilizing the benefits of those relationships for change. Some women indicated that their pride – or alternatively, shame – prevented them from getting help from others. For example, Barbara noted that her pride prevented her from turning to her mother for help when she was being abused by her husband, and now identifies that isolation as partly to blame for her current incarceration. Thus, even if positive relationships are available, they will not be useful in curbing women's criminal behavior if the women are not receptive to "latching on" to them.

A third consideration involves the larger context of women's lives, since the conditions in women's lives may constrain the apparent choices and actions that are available to them (or which they perceive as available) (Carlen, 1990). For instance, it is likely that the positive effects of relationships may be ineffective at spurring change if they are outnumbered by negative influences (Giordano et al., 2008). At least one woman (Margaret, 55 years old, African

American, murder) told us that she could not break away from an abusive drug dealing partner and call the police for help because she was *selling* drugs, as well as using them, herself. She believed that she had no legal avenues to which to turn and eventually felt that she had to "handle" him on her own. Many women also admitted that they were unable to heed the advice of or take help from others because they were *using* drugs and could not make well-reasoned decisions; it may be that women's decision-making ability is hindered when other factors, such as basic health and safety (e.g., freedom from drug use), are unmet, as well as if the conditions in which they live (e.g., where poverty, abuse, and drugs are present) also limit their options. As our study demonstrates, however, women offenders' lives are not devoid of positive people and opportunities – as we have highlighted the ways that women offenders may benefit from their relationships with others – but more research should be done to understand why such relationships are at times insufficient as buffers from crime.

In light of our insights regarding possible buffers in women offenders' lives, we offer some tentative suggestions for incorporating them into the response to women's criminal behavior. For instance, understanding the presence of these relationships (with whom, what benefits women gain from them, etc.) in women's backgrounds may help corrections officials to identify, (re)establish, and cultivate meaningful, prosocial relationships for women while they are incarcerated, as well as after they are released back into the community, as these same positive relationships and linkages may become important for women at various points in the criminal justice system (e.g., jail, incarceration, probation, parole, see Brennan and Austin, 1997, Farr, 2000, Pollock, 2002). Programs fostering positive relationships with others may include expanded visitations rights (Brennan, 1998) and privileges for mothers and children who are incarcerated, as it may be helpful for women to see (and thus be reminded of) those people who

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motivate their good behavior. It may also be important that healthy relationships with positive people in the community are maintained and supported *during* incarceration so that women can reconnect with them once they return to the community. Perhaps parole officers should identify and encourage such relationships or even incorporate the positive persons within their supervision strategies. Since our study suggests that positive networks may be available in women's lives, correctional programming and personnel should also consider building upon the "strengths" (Covington, 2000) of women offenders (including the positive people in their lives) in order to evoke change.

Our study is limited because the data was gathered for purposes other than the examination of relationships as buffers. Future research should further explore the role of supportive and prosocial relationships using both quantitative and qualitative techniques, and should consider expanding upon women's relationships to include criminal justice personnel and/or other prisoners or probationers (Bui and Morash, 2010, Cobbina, 2010, O'Brien, 2001). Further, we noticed the majority of women cited other females (e.g., aunts, girlfriends) as positive influences – it may be worth examining whether this is characteristic of most women offenders, and why females as opposed to males are more influential. Our sample was also limited in diversity (i.e., African American and White southerners), and because we were interested in exploring the most basic ways that women's positive relationships with others influenced their behavior, we did not address racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic variation in the buffering relationships. Certainly, a next step in this line of research might be to examine for whom (i.e., what types of women) and under what circumstances these relationships have the most "buffering" impact. For instance, it is possible that less disadvantaged women may evidence more buffering relationships in their lives

and exert more "agency" in their decision-making (Giordano et al., 2002, Laub and Sampson, 2003).

Our sample also focused on adult incarcerated offenders and therefore cannot address questions regarding relationships and desistance – it can only link women's relationships with temporary changes in their behavior. Future research should address whether women's relationships contribute to their full desistance from crime. Further, research on youthful female offenders is needed to examine the effects of relationships on girls' criminal behavior. Participants in our study had been incarcerated on average for 4 years, and it is possible that they were more apt to recall the positive aspects of their relationships after such a long separation. We also recognize the possibility that recall error may have been introduced because we were unable to record the interviews. Finally, researchers should continue to investigate women's expectations about how their relationships with others influence their successful re-integration into society after release from prison, as this holds many implications for correctional programming and re-entry initiatives.

It is important to recognize that despite their often difficult backgrounds, incarcerated women offenders report having positive relationships with others. Perhaps these relationships can act as buffers for women during their reentry into the community. A better understanding of the roles that family members, children, peers, and partners play in women's criminality (or lack thereof) is crucial to building supportive networks for crime prevention, risk reduction, and intervention.

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

	N	%
	N = 60	
Demographic Characteristics		
African American	31	52
White	29	48
High School Graduate	26	43
Have Children	47	78
Age	median = 31 years	
Offense Type		
Murder	7	12
Voluntary Manslaughter	7	12
Armed, Strong-Arm, or Common-Law Robbery	7	12
Cocaine/Crack Manufacture, Distribution, or Trafficking	7	12
Homicide by Child Abuse	6	10
Forgery	5	8
Burglary	4	7
Arson	3	5
Shoplifting	3	5
Kidnapping	2	3
Assault and Battery	2	3
Felony Driving Under the Influence	2	3
Child Neglect	2	3
Lewd Act on a Child	1	2
Grand Larceny	1	2
Financial Transaction Card Theft	1	2
Prior Offenses	36	60
Time Served on Current Sentence	mean ≈ 4 years	

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

Table 2. Types of Buffers and Life Circumstances

	N	%
	N = 60	
Types of Buffers		
Family Members	22	37
Friends/Peers	11	18
Children/Pregnancy	20	33
Romantic Significant Others	6	10
Lifetime Victimization		
Childhood Abuse (all forms)	56	93
Emotional/Verbal Abuse	47	78
Physical Abuse	36	60
Sexual Abuse	40	67
Domestic Violence	52	83
Criminality in Social Networks	58	97

Note: Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding and overlap