

## Summary

Enactment of adult roles such as parenthood, marriage, and employment has been tied to desistance (the slowing down or cessation of offending behavior) but little is known about how incarcerated women conceptualize these roles in the first place. Drawing on 35 in-depth interviews with incarcerated women, supplemented by mail correspondence with a sub-sample of these women, I explore how incarcerated women interpret their early life-course experiences when reflecting on their transition to adulthood and, subsequently, their views on adult roles and responsibilities. The women's narratives indicate that early experiences with trauma, along with premature entries into adult roles, result in a difficult transition to adulthood. I argue that women's accelerated transitions to adulthood shape their views on adult roles, pointing to a need to incorporate discussions of age-normative timetables in efforts to assist at-risk and incarcerated women.

## Author Biography

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## Incarcerated Women and the Transition to Adulthood

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Incarcerated women constitute a particularly vulnerable population; one that has increased more than six-fold between 1980 and 2008 (Kruttschnitt 2010). Incarcerated women are more likely than their male counterparts to have histories of physical or sexual abuse, which in turn exacerbate the harm that incarceration poses to their mental and physical wellbeing. If we are to assist the staggering number of women who are now reentering society, we must develop a fuller understanding of their prison and pre-prison experiences. In particular, members of vulnerable populations often experience difficult transitions to adulthood as they juggle multiple financial, familial, and social responsibilities. For incarcerated women, these transitions may impact how they view and enact adult roles (such as marriage, parenthood, and work) that are tied to their efforts to desist from crime upon their release from prison.

In this policy brief, I explore how incarcerated women reflect on their transition to and constructions of adulthood and how policy can be created to assist these women in their transitions after prison. Based on interviews with 35 adult women incarcerated at a state-run prison in the Northeastern U.S., supplemented by letters with a sub-sample of these women, my research reveals that many incarcerated women experience extremely strenuous transitions to adulthood, which may impact their lives after prison.

### 1. *Incarcerated women's histories of abuse affect their transitions to adulthood.*

Incarcerated women's early experiences with abuse and victimization disrupted the timetable for their transition to adulthood, accelerating it before the women felt that they were subjectively prepared to be adults. The early onset of women's victimization experiences is particularly important because the timing of these experiences resulted in many women believing that their experiences of abuse "stripped" them of a conventional childhood. As Zelda, a 34-year-old woman serving 20-60 years in prison, described:

I think enduring all the things I endured ... because I was like molested and raped, verbally, mentally, physically abused. Like I endured so much abuse in my life that I think that changed ... that stripped away that naiveness, that childhood away from me.

Repeated deviations from normative pathways to adulthood meant that many women—like Zelda—did not feel like adults yet or were only beginning to contemplate the meaning of adulthood in their 30s and 40s.

### 2. *Incarcerated women experience premature transitions to adult roles.*

Many women faced immense difficulties when they transitioned prematurely into caregiving responsibilities, marriages or serious relationships, and residential independence. The women's narratives suggest that the combination of premature entry into adult roles and their early experiences with abuse resulted in a complicated transition to adulthood marked by financial, emotional, and social instability. Jordan, a 33-year-old woman serving 10-20 years in prison, explains:

I was in high school; I went to a really, really good high school in Philadelphia, I had really good grades, and I didn't want it [motherhood] to be a setback because I was already taking care of my niece, so now it was like I was gonna have 2 kids now, you know? So it

## Source

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## Further Reading

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was like I was already carrying the load of caring for one child, and here comes another. And I'm in high school; I was only in the 10th grade and it was just ... it seemed like so much, you know?

Like Jordan many women noted the pressure that they felt because of these premature transitions into adult roles. And although some women noted that their strenuous transition to adulthood reinforced the sense of independence that they equated with being an adult, these women also recognized the structural constraints that had resulted in their premature transitions.

## Policy Implications & Recommendations

This research points to two key recommendations for policy makers:

### 1. Programs for women at risk of incarceration should focus explicitly on the *timing* of women's transitions to adulthood.

Programs designed to assist women in the criminal justice system should address the significance of marriage, parenting, and work in their lives. However, it is also imperative that these programs address the pressures that vulnerable women may feel to undergo these transitions into adulthood before they are ready to do so. Programs designed to help incarcerated and at-risk populations benefit from incorporating critical discussions of age-normative timetables for attaining adulthood, thereby supporting women in attaining these markers on timetables that protect them from the challenges associated with premature transitions.

### 2. Programs for women at risk of incarceration should provide intervention and support *during* the transition to adulthood.

Assisting at-risk women in avoiding premature transitions into adult roles is important, but it is essential to bear in mind that many women I interviewed did not undergo these premature transitions purely of their own volition. Instead, their precocious entry into adulthood roles resulted from very strenuous familial and economic pressures. The women's premature marriages, residential independence, and caregiving responsibilities derailed their life-course trajectories, and they would have benefited from more social and economic support during these transitions. It is thus important to develop programs for intervention and support during vulnerable women's transitions to adulthood, whether or not these transitions occur prematurely.

## Conclusion

Understanding how incarcerated women conceptualize adult roles requires a close look at the multiple points at which their life-course diverges from the conventional timetable for attaining adulthood in modern American culture (Settersten and Ray 2010). Incarcerated women's narratives suggest that the combination of premature entry into adult roles, as well as early experiences with abuse, result in a stressful transition to adulthood marked by instability. Programs designed to divert women away from incarceration would benefit from a greater focus on the *timing* of these women's transition to adulthood, ensuring that at-risk women are supported financially, emotionally, and socially during this crucial period in their life course.