

Precursors to Incarceration:

Women's stories From the
New River Valley Regional Jail



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Executive Summary:

Precursors to Incarceration: Women's Stories From the New River Valley Regional Jail

INTRODUCTION

Justice-involved women in the United States face substance use disorder (SUD), domestic violence (DV), and other factors as precursors to incarceration at concerning high rates. Gaps remain in existing literature with respect to how affected women perceive their experiences with these factors in relation to justice system involvement. We conducted a study at a rural Virginia jail to address some of these gaps.

METHODS AND FINDINGS

We conducted interviews with 15 incarcerated women about their histories with substance use, exposure to violence, and other experiences relevant to their justice involvement. We conducted a qualitative thematic analysis, and 12 themes were identified (Fig. 1). These findings are summarized in this booklet, including stories from each of the interviewed women. All women chose or were assigned a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This booklet includes a set of recommendations to promote and guide action among interested parties. These recommendations can be used to mitigate youth exposure to DV and substance abuse and to help break harmful generational cycles. They also underscore the need for accessible and appropriate mental health and SUD treatment services in correctional and community settings to reduce incarcerations, relapses, and recidivism. Recommendations fall under the following categories:

- *Research and data*
- *Primary prevention*
- *Education of correctional and DV shelter staff*
- *Alternatives to incarceration*
- *Services in correctional settings*
- *Community-based services post-incarceration*

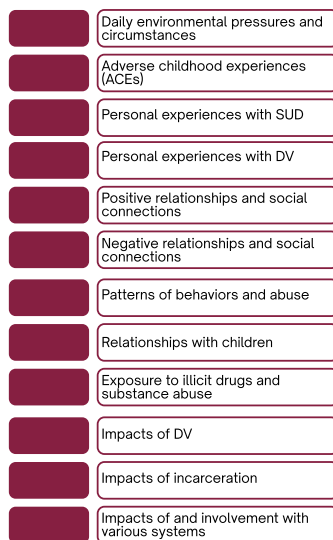


Figure 1: Study themes identified through thematic analysis

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WHO CAN USE THIS BOOKLET

These findings are relevant to professionals, volunteers, and academics in DV advocacy, substance abuse prevention, SUD treatment, health departments, housing, transportation, law enforcement, social work, legislation, community services, and research, as well as anyone else interested in the welfare of justice-involved populations.

FINAL THOUGHTS

This study highlights the need for accessible resources and interventions to positively influence factors related to incarceration and poor health outcomes. The women's stories shed light on the struggles faced by rural incarcerated women and the resources needed to reduce recidivism, SUD, and DV, in addition to improving overall health outcomes. This study aims to elicit change to improve the circumstances faced by and resources available to women before, during, and after incarceration.

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Introduction

Justice-involved women experience high rates of domestic violence (DV), substance use disorder (SUD), Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) [traumatic events during childhood that often have lasting negative impacts on the well-being of an individual], and other circumstances that affect their life, health, and societal function (Women's Justice, 2025). Oftentimes, their circumstances are largely the result of a trauma response to adverse experiences faced earlier in life. Society often marginalizes these women, rarely hearing their voices or uplifting their stories. To address this issue, we conducted a qualitative research study to examine how DV, SUD, and other factors influence the lives of incarcerated women. Through interviews with 15 incarcerated women, we explored how various factors intersected to shape their current situations. Each woman shared experiences involving ACEs, DV, substance abuse, or a combination of these challenges, with SUD often appearing as a trauma response for many of the women. The questions asked in the interviews were focused on uncovering precursors to incarceration and not intended to reveal the full life stories of the women. Moving forward, it is imperative that measures to disrupt cycles of DV and SUD and reduce associated stigma are implemented. Women struggling with SUD and trauma-related mental health concerns need better access to trauma-informed resources and care, in both carceral and community settings.

Trigger warning

Please note that the following sections include discussion of sensitive topics such as incarceration, DV, sexual assault, substance abuse, loss of loved ones, and more.

Methods

We conducted a study with women at the New River Valley Regional Jail in rural Southwest Appalachian Virginia. From August 2024 to October 2024, we interviewed 15 women in a private setting. They shared stories about their loved ones, experiences with DV and SUD, and the services they believed could support incarcerated women during confinement and after release. The average age of the women was 38 (ranging from 22 to 53), with one of the women identifying as Hispanic, two as African-American, and 12 as white. The interviews lasted from eight to 59 minutes and averaged 26 minutes. Each woman chose or was assigned a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality. Three separate coders transcribed and coded the interviews. We then conducted a thematic analysis to identify key themes and wrote a short story about each woman.

Stories were written using the interview transcripts to provide a summative background of the lives of each of the women. Many of the precursors and interactions discussed in this booklet are best understood on a human scale, so we recommend reading the individual stories that can be found at the end of the booklet.

The study was approved by the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Main Findings

A qualitative thematic data analysis was conducted, and 12 themes (Fig. 1) were identified and are summarized below.

Daily environmental pressures and circumstances.

Many women discussed various daily environmental pressures that profoundly influenced their lives.

These pressures include generational cycles of violence and SUD, staying with an abuser or in other harmful situations for the good of their families and loved ones, and other related pressures. Julia discussed her experience with an abusive partner, stating, *“I remember as a child*

thinking, ‘Mom, why are you letting him hurt you like that?’ I never understood it until it happened to me.” Similarly, many women experienced circumstances outside of their control that impacted their lives. This includes poverty, non-domestic violence, struggles related to transportation and housing, and difficulty juggling childcare and employment. Maggie shared, *“... I raised all my kids without their father. So it's hard. It's hard being mom and dad. So I've been through a lot.”*

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Of the 15 interviewed women, 14 recounted instances where they experienced ACEs. Some women expressed having experienced strained family dynamics due to parental incarceration, parental breakups, poverty, or law enforcement involvement in family functioning. Erin discussed her experience growing up in a dysfunctional household, stating,

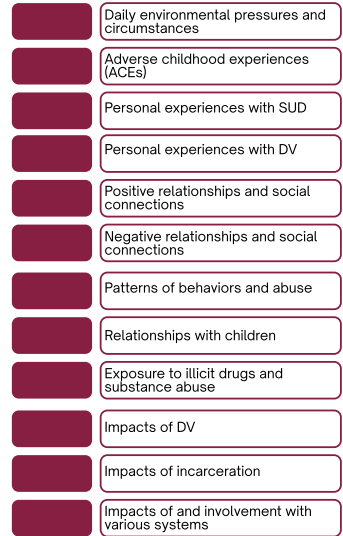


Figure 1: Study themes identified through thematic analysis

“I was born into confusion, I guess, turmoil, abuse, both physical and drug-related abuse.” Many of the women shared instances of witnessing family members or other loved ones being physically abusive, physically abused, or abusing substances. Additionally, some of the women experienced sexual or physical violence perpetrated against them as children. One of these women was Carmen. She stated, *“I was 12 years old, and my first sexual experience was being raped by my stepsister’s boyfriend, who was like 45.”* She went on to explain how experiencing sexual violence as a child impacted her, sharing, *“... I had problems associating love with sex. And so to me, it didn’t mean anything to have sex with somebody.”* Many women reported these ACEs as having direct impacts on their lives, mental health, and overall well-being. Some women referenced their SUD later in life as being a trauma response to the ACEs they faced growing up. Hannah discussed the loss of her grandmother triggering substance use in herself and her mother, sharing, *“My mom was more like my sister, my best friend. She’s my whole world. But her mom passed away... my mom got real suicidal. Both of us started getting high after that.”*

Personal experiences with SUD. Of the 15 interviewed women, 14 shared that they personally experienced SUD. Some women discussed their introduction into substance abuse as being environmental or social in nature, and some shared that their dependence to drugs worsened over time. Despite their reliance on substances, some women shared that they learned how to be functioning users. For Cate, SUD was a part of her life that she kept hidden. She shared, *“I mean, I raised two children, and nobody knew that I was ever on drugs.”* Callie is one of the women who views substance abuse as a trauma response. She shared, *“I think that we all have addiction in us. It’s just if something traumatic happens to us, it changes the way we think and process things.”*

Many women attributed their incarceration at least in part to their SUD, which makes it difficult for them to break their personal cycles of SUD and recidivism. Erica discussed her reason for incarceration being related to her SUD, sharing that she has possessions and public intoxications on her record, but that *“none of them were violent.”*

Personal experiences with DV. Many women discussed instances of being exposed to DV growing up or in their adult lives. Some of the women witnessed DV between their parents. Lynn discussed her early exposures to DV, stating, *“Domestic violence is the key to my life. My mom, my dad, they would fight. That was the number one thing. I remember my dad beating the crap out of my mom—I think he headbutted her. It was insane. So yeah, it’s always been a thing in my life.”* Other women experienced DV by an abusive partner. One woman, Barbara Bush, experienced extreme violence at the hands of a partner. She stated, *“I was shot in the leg. Yeah. When I was 21 by the boyfriend I was dating.”* This exposure to DV had lasting impacts on her health. Some women said their exposures to DV impacted their physical and mental health, as well as those around them such as children and other loved ones.

Positive relationships and social connections. Most of the women expressed having positive relationships and social connections that are extremely important to them. Many women highlighted certain family members as being positive and supportive forces in their lives. Maggie discussed her relationship with her granddaughter, stating, *“I just love her. I adore her. We don’t even have to talk to each other. She already knows what Grammy’s about to say. It’s just weird. We’re just like spiritually connected. It’s something to live for, something to smile about.”* Some women discussed having friends that are a positive part of their support systems. Angel talked about

positive friendships that she experienced within the jail, sharing, *“I have been working out with [other inmates]. We go in the gym and work out and do squats—I like to work out. It makes me feel good about myself.”* Many of the women consider these positive familial and social connections as a source of motivation and as a method of improving their outlooks on their current circumstances.

Negative relationships and social connections. On the other hand, many of the women reported negative relationships and social connections. Specifically, some women discussed instances growing up where family members or peers negatively impacted their lives. Simba shared her negative experiences with kids at school, stating, *“I was bullied all my life or whatever, until I got to high school.”* Other women experienced feeling betrayed by loved ones, which negatively impacted them. Angel, while discussing experiences with her family prior to incarceration, shared, *“My own brother signed a statement against me. So they served me with a restraining order so I couldn't talk to them at all.”* Many women reported feelings of estrangement from loved ones, often due to their own incarcerations or patterns of recidivism.

Patterns of behavior and abuse. Many of the women's stories indicated cycles of SUD, DV, and recidivism, both on an individual and generational level. Some women discussed SUD as being a generational aspect of their lives, specifically through parental substance abuse. Other women expressed their personal experiences with SUD as being cyclical. Carmen shared her pattern of abusing substances and how it impacted custody of her children, stating, *“I would get better, get my kids back, and then fall off again. Get my kids. Do better. And it was always just—it was always something.”* Some women discussed patterns of DV that they either witnessed, experienced themselves, or both. While discussing the women in her

family, Julia said, *“Like my granny, she was cheated on. She was abused. She never gave up. Like she stayed in her relationship because that’s what they did back then. My mama was the same way. I was the same way.”* Additionally, some women talked about their personal patterns of recidivism, as many of the women have been incarcerated multiple times and perceive themselves as stuck in the system.

Relationships with children. Fourteen of the 15 women interviewed reported being mothers. Women’s relationships with their children were frequently referenced and highly valued. Some women have positive relationships with their children that serve as a form of motivation for a better life. Carmen shared what it was like being a single mom to her son, saying; *“I guess he just tells me that even though I was a woman and I’m his mom, I was the best version of a father that he could have. So that’s how he learned how to be a good dad.”* Other women experienced estrangement from their children because of their incarceration, SUD, or due to Department of Social Services (DSS) or other government involvement. Maggie’s children are also estranged; she shared, *“I raised my kids by myself. And then when they reached a certain age, they abandoned me. And now they’re talking like I’m a piece of shit mom because I’ve been in jail.”* Additionally, some women indicated that the reason for their incarceration was related to their attempts to provide for their children.

Exposure to illicit drugs and substance abuse. Drugs play a significant role in the lives of many of the interviewed women. Some women resorted to selling drugs as a means of supporting their families. For many of the women, drugs were something they were exposed to at a young age that continued being a part of their lives into adulthood. Many of the women highlighted situations both

throughout their childhood and in their adult lives where they were exposed to drugs through others' substance abuse. Some of the women experienced instances of parental substance abuse and pressures. Maggie discussed the pressure she felt at a young age from her father to help him sell drugs, sharing, *"I started selling drugs for my dad when I was 13. Well, it come to a head, and I started selling mad drugs. I was making him 30,000 to 40,000 dollars a week, selling cocaine for him. I was good at what I did."*

Other women experienced exposure to substance abuse at the hands of a partner, loved one, or peer. Cate discussed the impact her partner's substance use had on her as an adult, saying, *"He was really good to me, but he introduced me to drugs. And that's what led me here, poor decisions. And so I've been here for three months."* Most of the women experienced substance abuse in their lives. Women shared short- and long-term impacts of exposures to drugs at young ages, experiences of loved ones' SUD, and first-hand experiences with SUD. Experiences with SUD were reported to have lasting impacts on the overall well-being of many of the women.

Impacts of DV. Almost all of the women we interviewed experienced DV during their lives. Exposure to DV impacted the women and their loved ones. Tibby discussed the immediate impact that DV had on her relationship, saying, *"As soon as he hit me the first time, love was gone."* Some other women emphasized the negative impact that their abusive relationships had on the way they view love and sex. Some experienced abusive relationships with partners that not only negatively impacted them, but also their children. Julia, when discussing why she stayed with her abusive partner, stated, *"I stayed with him for eight years because I wanted my daughter to have a dad. But then I realized, the only person—like yes, he's hurting me. But he is really hurting her."* Some women disclosed injuries, which

ranged in severity, that they accrued from DV encounters. Women reported their DV experiences as extremely traumatic, with lasting impacts on their mental and physical health.

Impacts of incarceration. Many women experienced repercussions of the carceral system that impacted their lives and the lives of their loved ones. Some women reported struggling with feelings of hopelessness, loss, and mental health concerns due to involvement in the justice system. Lynn shared, *“When they lock people up, they don’t realize—I mean, the outside world screws with your head, but they don’t realize what this does. They don’t ever need to think this is some type of rehabilitation, because this is not. This really isn’t.”*

Other women struggled with SUD prior to incarceration and shared how the lack of accessible treatment options impacted them. Additionally, many women expressed having nowhere to go upon release from incarceration. Similarly, many women fear the impact that employment restrictions for felons may have on them once they get out. Erica voiced her concern regarding post-incarceration employment, stating, *“... but if I go try to get a job at McDonald’s, if they go look at my record, just because of the public intakes, not including the possessions that I got caught with, they don’t want to hire me.”* For some women, being incarcerated allowed them to grow closer to their faith or emboldened them to practice self-care. While some women found jail to be a reprieve from DV, substances, or other stressors, other women felt burdened by the system and how it negatively affected their mental health. Callie discussed how being incarcerated has influenced her mental health, sharing, *“I feel like this is not healthy for us. A lot of the times we have post-traumatic stress disorder. I have severe post-traumatic stress disorder.”*

Impacts of and involvement with various systems. Many women were involved with systems prior to their incarceration that impacted their circumstances and, in some cases, the circumstances of their families and loved ones as well. This includes involvement with law enforcement, the legal system, DSS, and other systems. Veronica discussed her life growing up prior to incarceration, explaining, *“I was in juvie when I was younger, and it’s always been this system. All the time.”* Some women reported that perceived injustices at the hands of systems negatively impacted them and/or their families. Additionally, many women shared life changes they intend to make upon release. Callie shared, *“I’m just looking forward to getting out and making a difference and getting out and helping people that are incarcerated unfairly because I feel like people get lost in this system.”* Many of the women are mothers and expressed excitement surrounding getting out and being able to support and parent their children again. Most women expressed concern regarding access to resources such as transportation, housing, and rehabilitation facilities upon release from jail. All women were provided with an opportunity to share resources that they believe people in their position need, and among those mentioned were accessible rehabilitation programs, accessible housing options, increased employment opportunities for felons, transportation options, resources specific to pregnant women, and accessible mental health support.

Recommendations

After we reviewed existing literature, heard from the women about resources needed, and conducted the thematic analysis, we developed several recommendations.

1. *Research and Data*

- Increase the focus on research centered around gender-specific concerns faced by incarcerated women (Salisbury & Crawford, 2025).
- Support incarcerated women by providing them with the opportunity to share their stories and prevent other women from experiencing similar circumstances (Lynch et al., 2012).

"I feel like there should be more time and research invested into substance abuse and rehabilitation as opposed to being incarcerated."

- Callie

"... safe house for abused women because women die every day, and nobody realizes. People don't even realize what's going on behind closed doors. Because there are some big, mean men out there. And they can really put on a show."

- Maggie

2. *Primary Prevention*

- Implement evidence-based programs and education to reduce youth exposure to DV and substance use (Griffin & Botvin, 2010).
- Provide community-based preventative services to keep people out of jail (transportation, accessibility to affordable food, support groups, mental health support, parenting classes, etc.) (Roberts et al., 2004).

3. Education for correctional and DV shelter staff

- Implement trauma-informed education on the risks faced by women who have experienced DV and/or SUD to reduce the likelihood of experiencing continued trauma and/or incarceration (Miller & Najavits, 2012).
- Provide jail staff with training to recognize trauma and SUD in incarcerated individuals and to respond in a trauma-informed manner (Levenson & Willis, 2018).
- Provide DV shelter staff with the training to address the needs of previously incarcerated women with past trauma (Sullivan et al. 2018).

“Some of these guards are not really sensitive to the fact that we have post-traumatic stress disorder...” - Callie

“I just feel like there should be more help with women that need mental health and substance abuse, and incarceration is definitely not the answer for a lot of us.” - Callie

4. Alternatives to incarceration

- Educate court systems to encourage women to partake in educational programs that address their unique concerns and experiences (Gill, 2011).
- Implement recovery court and rehabilitation opportunities to provide trauma-informed care and address the unique needs of people with SUD (Naegle et al., 2004).
- Provide educational programs for at-risk women on topics such as handling trauma, life skills, professionalism, job training, and parenting to break the cycles of DV and incarceration (Gottlieb & Mahabir, 2022).

5. Services in correctional settings

“I mean, they need to get counselors that know what they’re doing. They know what they’re talking about, not what they’ve read. I mean, not everybody’s the same. I mean, every case is different. Every person’s different. They need to see that. The judges, the courts, need to see that every person is different. Don’t just throw them all away because of a drug habit.” – Cate

- Implement trauma-informed and gender-specific counseling in carceral settings to validate women's experiences with DV and provide skills centered around coping and regulating emotions (i.e previous trauma, safety in relationships, managing trauma) (McCoy & Russo, 2018).
- Incorporate programs into carceral settings to teach women health literacy (Hwang et al., 2025).
- Implement high-quality and accessible SUD treatment programs that cater to incarcerated women's specific set of needs during confinement (Staton et al., 2023).
- Implement peer-support groups in carceral settings that address trauma-related struggles and create a sense of community among incarcerated women (Maskolunas, 2023).

6. Community-based services post incarceration

"I know that there's resources out there. You just have to be able to get to them and know where they are and who they are and know who to turn to."
- Daisy

- Promote continued DV counseling support post release by connecting women with community-based services prior to release (Edwards et al., 2022).
- Implement high-quality and accessible SUD treatment programs that cater to previously incarcerated women's specific post-release needs (Begun et al., 2011).

- Connect previously incarcerated individuals to appropriate, high-quality mental health services upon release (Edwards et al., 2022).
- Provide women with a discharge manager who can connect women with high-quality and accessible discharge resources and a variety of services, so that they can access the support and treatment they may need during reentry (Edwards et al., 2022).
- Provide options for previously incarcerated individuals to obtain transitional housing during reintegration that caters to those with previous trauma and/or SUD (Walter et al., 2020).
- Provide assistance in job placement efforts for previously incarcerated individuals (Cantora, 2014).
- Ensure that previously incarcerated individuals have access to comprehensive, high-quality medical care post release (Edwards et al., 2022).
- Provide women with accessible transportation options, such as free ride services or bus passes, during their transitional post-release period (Nordberg et al., 2021).

Introduction to the stories

The following are the stories of the 15 women interviewed at the New River Valley Regional Jail in Southwest Virginia. The women's names and the names of those mentioned in the interviews have been altered to ensure anonymity. Note that the questions asked in the interviews were framed to uncover precursors to incarceration and did not ask about the women's full life stories. The interviews are summarized below, with a focus on the experiences described during the interviews. Please note that the following stories include mention of sexual assault, drug misuse, DV, SUD, loss of loved ones, and other sensitive topics.



“The only reason I agreed to talk to you was so I could get my story out for my children.” Angel’s story is as much about her children as it is about her. As a 49-year-old mother, Angel should be watching her two sons and daughter grow up, graduate high school, and become young adults. Instead, she mourns the loss of her daughter and younger son who were murdered at ages 14 and 19. Angel recognizes she was not a perfect parent, but she took care of the children far more than either of her abusive husbands. Her first husband and father of both sons was physically abusive and an alcoholic, often coming home drunk and ready to fight.

**“I’ll
grieve
over my
two kids
forever”**

Angel’s second husband and the father of her daughter was also an alcoholic, but more verbally abusive than her previous partner. He shared an intimate video of Angel on the internet without her consent. Despite Angel being the parent who showed up to school functions and managed the home, both husbands framed Angel as involved in the murder of her children. She admits to having a substance use problem but so did both husbands, yet somehow Angel became the one to blame.

Now in jail, Angel is left to work through the years of hurt from her husbands and family. She grew up in an unstable home where fighting was the norm, and everyone said she would never be good enough. Angel is proud of herself for obtaining her General Education Development (GED) and wants to move on with her life once released from jail, including moving on from the way her husbands and family exploited her on the internet and from the people in jail who don’t understand her story. She wants to get out and help establish resources such as recreation centers for other women and children who experience hurt and abuse. Angel shares, “you ought to - for your children - treat each other with every respect.” She values children more than anything else and wants her story to bring justice to her children and others.

Barbara Bush is hopeful for her life after incarceration. She paints a picture of wanting to be a better wife to her husband of 15 years. She dreams of being there for her three children, playing with them, making dinner, and reading bedtime stories. Barbara knows she needs to make changes in her life and is optimistic about the future. "When I get out of here, I see it as a fresh start. I found my faith again. I was in a dark place and I guess I was pulled out of that somehow." Even challenging parts of her past have slowly faded away, allowing Barbara to move on. Her parents and stepparents have all passed, and the place she used to live was torn down. While Barbara waits for her release, she is ready to focus on changing her future.

From the outside, Barbara's childhood appeared normal. She played sports, took piano lessons, attended church every week, and even graduated high school early. What people did not see was the role drugs and abuse played in her life. Barbara's father sold drugs and died by suicide when she was 21 years old. Her parents separated when she was 12 and both remarried. Her stepfather was abusive, beating both Barbara and her mother. Barbara's stepfather also sexually abused her at night. At first, he would stop when she woke up, but over time he would hold her down as he molested her. Barbara felt alone in these experiences as her mother accused her of lying when she tried to disclose the abuse.

"I really want to get out and be the mother my children deserve, be the wife my husband deserves"

Her abusive stepfather also shared drugs with Barbara when she was only a teenager. Barbara recalls, "He got ahold of me and started sharing with me." She started with cannabis and alcohol and eventually turned to pills. Despite the abuse and substance use, Barbara went to college, had a successful career, and started her own family.

Barbara knows changing her life after jail will take work. She wants to attend in-person rehabilitation to address her previous substance use. She wants one-on-one treatment but is open to any resource available. The same drive that

saw Barbara through a childhood of abuse and helped her graduate college now motivates her to change and get back to her family.

Even as a child Callie felt different. Growing up in an unstable home, Callie was exposed to DV, substance use, and loss at a young age. Callie lived with her biological mother whose SUD started before she was born. Her mother's substance use continued throughout Callie's childhood, causing serious impacts on Callie: "Even before I was an addict or put substance into my body, I always felt a lot more different. I didn't really relate to everybody. Constantly wanting to change the way that I felt." Her mother was also involved in various relationships involving DV, and Callie witnessed men physically abusing her mother countless times. The chaos from her mother caused Callie to be left alone at home a lot, and as a child, she also had an experience of sexual abuse.

In addition to lacking a maternal figure, Callie did not meet her biological father until she was 27 years old. Callie's grandmother became her main parental figure, and going to her grandmother's house provided a sense of normalcy in her life. Sadly, her grandmother passed away when Callie was 11, and things went downhill afterward. In her teens, Callie moved to the East Coast with hopes of starting over and turning her life around. Instead, she found challenges with places being unfair and getting caught up in what she calls "the good old boy system." She was in and out of incarceration for drug-related offenses and had her first child at 16.

Now married with four children, Callie wants to start a nonprofit when she and her husband get out of jail. She feels passionate about helping others avoid what she sees as unfair incarceration and recognizes the need for more mental health and SUD support. Callie feels as though people get lost in the judicial system, and incarceration is not always the solution. She looks forward to helping others address their mental health and substance use in ways that could have helped her.

**"A lot of us
were really
good
people and
just didn't
have good
guidance"**

For twenty-five years Cate was married to an abusive husband. During those years her record was spotless—not even a speeding ticket. It wasn't until she left her husband and met someone new that she tried illicit substances for the first time. While her new boyfriend treated her well, he also introduced her to drugs. After that, “it all went downhill.” In and out of prison, Cate struggled to find help in addressing her SUD. She never received rehabilitation services or other support. Instead, she feels the system only perpetuated her use.

“People don’t realize that being addicted to a drug, it’s terrible. I mean, they think you should just be able to quit, but you can’t”

Upon release from a previous sentence, Cate struggled to stay sober amidst the challenges of life. Turning to drugs felt easier, especially not having support from counselors or other services. Cate was able to mask her substance use, still raising her children and going to work. She feels society misperceives substance users as caricatures with sunken faces and missing teeth. She is just a normal person with a history of being abused who needed help treating a SUD.

As a mother and grandmother, she dreams of getting back to her family and staying sober for both herself and loved ones: “I’ve never been away from my babies this long. So when I get out, I’m going to rehab, and I’m going to stay off of the drugs.” Cate feels misunderstood by the judicial system and wishes it would view each case as unique and an opportunity to offer rehabilitation services. Too many times, she has been written off and thrown away, considered a “bum or menace to society.” Cate wants this time in jail to be the last and is ready to walk out of and away from the rotating door that has trapped her in the past.

Carmen had to grow up faster than expected for most young girls. She had her first sexual encounter at age twelve when her stepsister's boyfriend raped her.

"I think my life was kind of doomed from a young age."

Afterwards she struggled to associate sex with love, describing her teen years as "promiscuous." With little success from seeing a counselor, Carmen started smoking cigarettes at age 13. The next year she met the man who would become her oldest son's dad, and Carmen's mother allowed him to move into their family home. Shortly after, Carmen became pregnant and gave birth to a son. For the first time, Carmen felt unconditional love, happily giving up high school experiences to stay home with her baby. She continued to love and support her son, even after separating from her son's father due to his substance use.

Still a teen and on her own, Carmen moved and met another man. She desperately wanted a daughter and quickly became pregnant. He left before Carmen gave birth, and she was a single parent again. Now with a son and daughter, Carmen "tried to be the best mom and dad I could be," but was exposed to drugs for the first time. Unaware she had smoked cocaine while using another drug, she became addicted to a feeling she had never felt before. The next few years were a struggle of raising her children while using drugs. At age twenty-two she was so deep into SUD she didn't realize she was eight months pregnant with her third child. A year later she became pregnant with her fourth son and stopped using hard drugs and alcohol from then on.

When Carmen's youngest son was five months old, her partner left her. With four children and no source of income, Carmen knew she had to do something to provide for her family. She started writing fraudulent checks to pay her expenses and was arrested 45 days later. Over the next few years, Carmen accumulated various convictions, but by 2015 had completed her sentences. Wanting to stay out of trouble, she largely avoided the substances and people that had previously led her down a bad path for almost ten years. Unfortunately, an opportunity to sell drugs led to her most recent conviction.

Now in jail, Carmen shares she is choosing a different path forward. Her life to this point has been influenced by childhood adversity, substance use, and survival, but she wants her future to be different: "So I think my biggest fear now is not getting to watch my grandkids grow up and losing my mom and being behind bars." Carmen hopes her faith and new habits will allow her to be with her family yet again and hug her mom one more time before she passes away.

Daisy describes her situation as “a big mess.” Miles away from her home state, Daisy feels hopeless and alone. She wants to start over, but without a car or place to stay, she has limited options. The only people Daisy knows are from jail, and she is unsure of what she will do upon release. Daisy is hardworking and wants to have a job, but she questions where to start in her situation of “not knowing anybody and not knowing where to go, I mean, I don’t even know the streets.”

As a single mother of five children, Daisy is no stranger to hardship. She had her first baby at 19 years of age and three more children in the following years. Her relationship with their father was challenging, and she split up with him in her late twenties. Daisy describes her thirties as “a lot of rough times” as she worked at a factory and raised her children. She then had her youngest son at age 40 but later lost custody of him. Her already difficult situation became increasingly worse with the death of her grandmother and pets, leaving her feeling even more alone.

**“I don’t
have a
support
system. And
it’s pretty
scary when
you realize
that there’s
nobody.”**

While mourning the loss of many loved ones, Daisy more recently experienced situations of violence from family members and law enforcement. As a result, she has been in and out of jail for various altercations she does not feel were her fault. Daisy feels wronged by those she trusted and overwhelmed with how to go forward: “I was just trying to make it back to Ohio, back to my child and my grandchild and whatever, but I haven’t been able to do that. So just kind of stuck in the system now and don’t really have any place to go or a vehicle anymore.”

Daisy wishes there were more resources available to assist incarcerated individuals like herself with reentry. If she could simply have a place to stay, she believes her situation would be different. Daisy wants to change her path and be a productive worker again, but without support, she feels unable to make the changes she desires.

What does it take to break out of a cycle of incarceration? After three years in and out of jail, Erica is still trying to figure this out. Currently serving time for multiple infractions, Erica feels stuck in “a never-ending repeating cycle.” She has hopes for her future outside of jail but expects to struggle to support herself after release without assistance from family or friends. When considering the important people in her life, Erica shares, “I don’t really have any important people besides myself.” She has not seen her children in years, only occasionally speaks with her father, and has no friends.

Erica’s difficulties began long before incarceration. She grew up with divorced parents and primarily stayed with her father. He lost custody of Erica’s twin sister when they were young, and Erica only stayed with him through age 17, at which point she moved into her own apartment. Substances were not present in her family during her childhood, but when Erica turned 18, she started using drugs with her father. Erica continues to struggle with SUD, trying various recovery programs in the past but feeling unsuccessful in finding a program with which she can follow through.

As Erica seeks to change her future, she finds housing to be one of the biggest barriers for herself and other incarcerated women. Upon release, Erica is on her own to navigate housing and she describes how the stability of jail “becomes comfortable” at times. Another difficulty is finding work with a criminal record. Erica wants to work and earn an income, but securing even a minimum-wage paying job is hard. Without housing, a job, or support, Erica is one of the many women stuck in the cycle of incarceration, in need of better resources to break the cycle.

“Will I come back in here? Statistically, probably. But let’s hope not.”

Erin's children are everything to her. She has three beautiful children of whom she is incredibly proud and considers gifts from God. Erin shares, "They're motivation, they cause me to be ambitious." In the depths of abusive relationships and other struggles, Erin's children served as her purpose and only friends. Now in jail and away from her children, Erin is trying to understand the situations that separated her from her family.

Negative influences began from the very start of Erin's life. She was born into an abusive family, with early exposure to substance abuse and violence. As she got older, violence continued in her own romantic relationships and later marriage. "I am a victim — or I don't like to say victim. I like to say survivor of domestic violence myself. So it's kind of like history repeated itself. I'm not sure why." In addition to

"I was born into confusion, I guess, turmoil, abuse, both physical and drug-related abuse."

experiencing violence from her partners, Erin also dealt with SUD. Her substance use evolved from drug misuse to abuse as she struggled to manage pain after surgeries. Later realizing the influence of her substance use on her family, Erin decided to seek help, but it came too late to prevent incarceration.

Considering her situation, Erin wishes a better life for her children. She worries others will judge her children or withhold educational and other resources from them because of her actions. Erin's love for them motivates her to change, and she is determined to find a new community and stay busy after release. She recognizes that she needs to surround herself with "people who have already got their lives together" and form new routines to change her previous habits. Erin's upbringing and abuse from others may have led to where she is now, but she wants to change and create a different life for her children.

Hannah did everything possible to support her family despite constant adversity. As a single mother of two, Hannah is accustomed to making sacrifices to provide for her young children. Even so, she felt her best was never enough to prove her parental capabilities to the judicial system. “I’ve done everything the judge told me to do,” Hannah remarks as she serves her sentence in jail. She feels frustrated that her children are now in the custody of their violent father. She shares, “They are with my ex, with the domestic violence.”

Adversity began at a very young age for Hannah. She grew up in a military family and moved around throughout her childhood. When Hannah was about ten years old, she recalls a particularly traumatic biking accident that put her in a coma for days. After recovering, challenges continued as Hannah experienced the deaths of various loved ones. To cope with the loss, Hannah and her mom started using substances and continued to do so in the subsequent years. Hannah’s early adult years were a mix of violence and stress from others as she attempted to work and raise her children. Hannah describes how she “got raped on end for like three to five months,” in addition to physical beatings from her partners.

“I’m going to be with my family, and that’s where I need to be.”

Despite Hannah’s best efforts to manage her situation, she continually had encounters with DSS and law enforcement. Each time Hannah tried to start over, something or someone from her past returned to prevent it.

The stress became so great she miscarried one of her pregnancies, something Hannah is still processing to this day. Now in jail, Hannah shares she has “been trying to find acceptance in here that it’s going to put me on a better path. It’s going to pay off in my favor.”

She looks forward to getting out and starting over, knowing she will be self-reliant when she does. Others may have had control over her past, but Hannah wants to be in control of her future.

"Well, I was abused. But I was never abused as a child. It's when I became an adult is when all of it started."

Julia is the third in a line of women with experiences of DV. "Like my granny, she was cheated on. She was abused. She never gave up. Like she stayed in the relationship because that's what they did back then. My mama was the same way. I was the same way."

The women in Julia's family are far too familiar with abuse and pain. At an early age, Julia watched her mom endure her stepfather's drinking and later his

infidelity. Julia's biological father was also not a part of her life, dying by suicide after murdering his brother. Julia credits her mother for selflessly raising Julia and her sister, recalling her childhood as good despite the circumstances.

As a mother herself, Julia experienced her own set of challenges. "Both of my kids, they watched me struggle and go through a lot." Julia has two children, a son and a daughter in their early twenties. Three months after the birth of her son, Julia's mother took custody of him against her will. Eleven months later, Julia had a daughter, prompting her to move out of her mother's house where she was living at the time. The fresh start did little to ease the pain of losing her son, and she turned to substances to cope with the grief. Describing her mother's attempts to persuade her towards sobriety, Julia shares, "As many times as she begged me to stop doing drugs, I just couldn't. The hurt was just so bad."

On top of struggles with SUD and losing her son, Julia also navigated abusive relationships. Her daughter's father was physically abusive, nearly killing her on multiple occasions. After leaving him, she married another man who later attempted to rape her daughter. Julia's husband now lives in another country after being deported, and finding it difficult to navigate the divorce process, she feels stuck in the relationship.

Julia hopes her release from jail will be a lasting change. "This time, it's a lot different. I don't want to do drugs anymore." She wants to do things better, both for herself and for her children. Julia plans to access resources, wishes there were more opportunities to volunteer, and is disappointed by the lack of productive ways to stay busy as she seeks to start over.

"I have never been so thankful to come to jail as I was [date] because I knew I was alive. I might have got six years in prison, but my kids still have a mom." Lynn's two young boys mean everything to her. As a single mother, she would do anything to protect and provide for her children. Lynn went so far as to take the blame for a crime she did not commit to keep her family safe, leading to her current sentencing. Now in jail, she mourns being away from her boys and missing pivotal moments of their childhood. At the same time, Lynn finally feels safe from the years of DV she experienced.

Lynn is no stranger to childhood adversity. Her own upbringing was unusual, and she describes herself as a "wild child." Lynn's abusive father died when she was seven, and she grew up with a single mom. They lived in a small town where Lynn felt the only thing to do was drink and get high. Her substance use continued on and off throughout grade school, and she had her first criminal conviction at age 17, resulting in juvenile detention.

Lynn's young adult years remained challenging, and she had her oldest son at age 20. Lynn strived to raise her son and maintain sobriety but struggled after the loss of a close friend and an experience of sexual violence. "I got raped one night, and just my mind went all to hell." The next few years were a blur of substance use and DV by her ex-partner. Thankfully, Lynn and her children lived with Lynn's mother, allowing Lynn to shield her children from the substances and violence in her life. They never had to see the scars she endured from her partner or the ways she tried to seek help before getting incarcerated instead. Now in jail, Lynn counts down the days until her release, when she can get back to her family. Lynn acknowledges her children's hurt from her absence and wants to be a better mom when she gets out. Lynn summarizes her hopes as, "Honesty, my only plan is stay sober and be home with the kids."

"I can get over everything else. I can get over the scars. That showed me I'm still alive. I can get over sexual abuse. I can get past all that. I think the institutionalization, the kids, I can't get that back. And that's the part that hurts the worst."

Maggie started selling drugs when she was only 13 years old. At such a young age, criminal involvement was not Maggie's objective. Her abusive father was a drug dealer and when he recruited Maggie's help, she had no option but to join the family business. Maggie was successful in the endeavor, but over time, the work became too much. When she tried to quit and get her life back, her father testified against her in court. In Maggie's experience, "It seemed like the more I tried to be right, the harder it was." Despite working for her father and even helping him avoid arrest, she served a nearly three-year sentence for a life into which he forced her.

"This life chose me. I didn't choose it. When you have to live under somebody else's shadow who is a full-blown outlaw, that's what happens."

Maggie's mother had a lasting impact on her, but for very different reasons. Her mother passed away when Maggie was 20 years old and a new mom herself. Maggie did her best to support her four children despite navigating substance abuse and DV. Maggie's substance use became SUD as she describes, "You have a disease. Just like someone has cancer, you have addiction."

In addition to needing SUD treatment, Maggie was contending with an abusive husband. Currently in prison for abusing Maggie, he caused years of harm. Maggie looks forward to testifying against him and standing up for herself for the first time.

Now sober, Maggie is pained by seeing her children struggle with substance use. Maggie will never forget having to revive her youngest son from an overdose, performing cardiopulmonary resuscitation for 45 minutes before he started breathing again. She wants a better life for them, especially her youngest son and the father of her grandchild. Maggie's granddaughter is a bright light in her life, and Maggie looks forward to getting back to her: "It's time for me to be me and work on me because I got a granddaughter that adores me." While Maggie has a place to stay after her release, she recognizes housing as one of the most important unmet needs among incarcerated women. She believes other women like herself would benefit from a safe place to stay to help them get back on their feet after jail.

Simba's life has included many hard decisions, the most challenging being her choice to leave a previous partner. Her former partner and the father of her third child was abusive. His abuse was so intense that Simba knew staying

"And that was the hardest thing I had to do, was walk away from him and give a better life to my sons than what I could have. And that's what makes me a good mom, too."

with him would eventually lead to her death. Instead, she made the difficult decision to walk away, and feels she lost everything in the process: "And that was hard for me because when I lost everything, I didn't care anymore. I didn't care about my life anymore. My life was dark. And I wouldn't wish that on anybody."

Challenges started long before Simba's relationship with the father of her third child. "Growing up, I had it hard." Simba was bullied throughout her childhood. At home, Simba's mom was a busy single mother of four, and her father offered little support. As a parent herself, Simba navigated multiple abusive relationships. "I was almost beat to death or whatever when I was pregnant with my second son." The abuse ended when he got into legal trouble, but a year later, she entered another abusive relationship, the end of which left her once again feeling she was losing everything.

Now in jail, Simba is hopeful her life will be different upon release. She is pregnant, and the father of her soon-to-be fourth child is her support and role model. Simba describes herself as a "recovering addict" and found rehabilitation services helpful. She knows "if I stay in the right path that I'm in, being clean, going on my probation or whatever, then I won't end up back incarcerated." She recognizes the importance of utilizing the resources available to her upon release.

Tibby is familiar with disappointment. Countless people in her life, particularly those she trusted, have let her down. The pain in Tibby's adult life started with the death of her first child at four months old. After his death, she struggled to care about her life and previous priorities. While still mourning her son, Tibby got together with her ex-husband, believing he truly cared for her. Instead, what followed was an abusive relationship filled with physical and emotional scars. "As soon as he hit me the first time, love was gone." He beat Tibby, often in front of their children, and berated. His abuse lasted until Tibby worked up the courage to leave, losing some of her beloved possessions in the process.

Tibby's relationship with her ex-husband was not the first time she experienced abuse.: "I was severely raped when I was nine years old. I didn't even think I was ever going to be able to have children, neither did the doctors. I was traumatized from that." The children to whom she later gave birth experienced their own hardships. One of Tibby's daughters has severe mental health challenges, making Tibby's role as a parent difficult. Regardless, Tibby loves her children and is very protective of them. She shares in reference to her ex-husband, "He didn't hurt my kids. I wasn't going to let him. If he was beating on me and not the kids, then that was okay." Tibby shielded her children, taking on abuse from her ex-husband so they wouldn't have to.

"I want to get out in the future and be able to cook in my own house, be able to have my own apartment, be able to do what I want, be able to get my uncle, my mama, my boys you know?"

In the process of leaving her husband, Tibby found help from a DV organization. She was able to receive assistance such as food and clothing while she worked to start over. Tibby believes in the importance of making resources available to incarcerated women, especially since many lose everything while in jail. Tibby herself lost her house and other belongings, and she looks forward to utilizing resources upon her release.

Veronica attributes some of her poor decisions in life to having had to raise herself. As a child, Veronica and her family moved across the country to get away from her father. In their new home, Veronica's mom was a single parent raising Veronica and her two brothers. While Veronica admires her mom for her decision and ability to start over, Veronica also recognizes how she was forced to become independent at a young age. Veronica recalls raising herself and getting into trouble without parental guidance. On top of little support at home, Veronica experienced bullying at school. "I guess I've been bullied my whole life. Not even just — not from the kids, but from the teachers, actually." Other children and even teachers bullied Veronica, prompting her to finish high school with a GED rather than graduate.

Coping with home dynamics and bullying at school, Veronica started using cannabis at age 12. She blames the people around her for influencing her substance use and began experimenting with harder drugs at age 14. Substance abuse became SUD as Veronica describes, "I just kept wanting that same feeling."

Veronica's older brother also struggled with substance abuse, which eventually contributed to his murder. After her brother died, Veronica continued to

struggle with SUD, finding an escape from her emotions when she used. "That's why when you get sober, it's hard because not only are you—your body's craving drugs, but then all these feelings and emotions come flooding back in, and you don't know what to do with it, you don't know how to take it all back in."

In addition to substances causing pain and experiences with violence in Veronica's life, they also served as a barrier to starting over after incarceration. She was in juvenile detention as a child and now feels stuck in the system. Veronica finds there are a lack of programs for individuals with drug or violence charges, sharing how even finding an apartment can feel impossible. Veronica hopes programs will become more inclusive in the future, looking beyond criminal charges to help the person behind them who wants to change.

"I kind of just raised myself. And my older brother kind of raised me. So I guess that's why I am in here today."

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