

## **Women on Parole, Identity Processes, and Primary Desistance**

Rebecca Stone, Ph.D., Merry Morash, Ph.D., Marva Goodson, M.S., Sandi W. Smith, Ph.D. and Jennifer E. Cobbina, Ph.D.

For women released from prison and placed on parole supervision, the first months are crucial in setting their trajectory of desisting from crime or returning to illegal behavior. Some women make sense of their prior illegal activity by, for example, describing how they have used negative experiences to give them insight and strength to change and make positive contributions to society (the redemption theme). In contrast, others are most influenced by experiences that they feel make it impossible to make positive changes (the contamination theme).

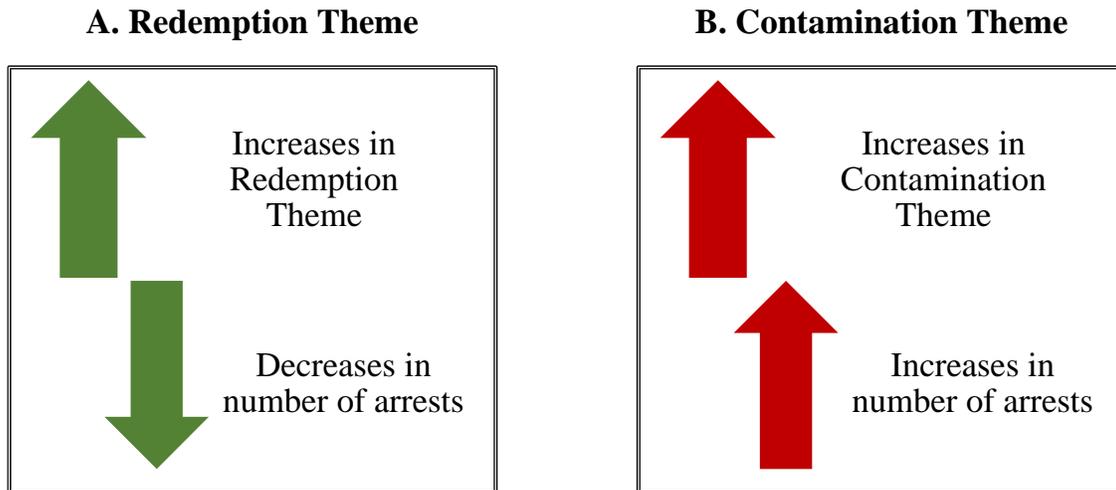
These identity themes led to the investigation of two key questions probation and parole agents should consider as they attempt to help women on their caseloads:

- 1. How do we help women change their identities in a positive way that supports lawful and productive behavior?**
- 2. What promotes women's view that their prior experiences and development permanently keep them in a cycle of illegal activity?**

### **Research Design**

- We focused on 93 women on parole. They were supervised by 17 agents spread across 13 Michigan counties within 1 ½ hour drive from Lansing MI. The counties included rural, suburban, small town, and large urban areas.
- All of the women had a history of substance use or current use. They ranged from age 20 to 59, and were a mix of White, Black, Hispanic, and multiracial groups. Although some had just one prior arrest or conviction, the range was up to 22 prior arrests and 36 prior convictions.
- Data were from three face-to-face interviews carried out at 3-month intervals over 6 months, and from official records of arrest.
- We compared the identity themes of women with no new arrests to those with new arrests in the three years after beginning parole.

## Key Research Findings



Redemption themes in the first 9 months of parole supervision were negatively related to the number of arrests in 36 months (Figure A). In contrast, contamination themes in this same period predicted more arrests (Figure B).

### **Findings about identity to support and encourage redemption:**

An example of a redemption theme for a woman with no new arrests:

“I don’t regret the time that I spent in prison because it changed my life, and it changed my mentality and I got a lot accomplished in those 27 months that I would not have gotten accomplished. And I really think it saved my life from ecstasy [an illegal drug], from prostitution, from all kinds of stuff.”

An example of how a redemption theme that provides a woman who has no new arrests with a positive, future script to follow.

“Yeah, it’s [the job is] setting me up for the future, mainly. Like the job, the job, it’s a really good reference, because the boss is very well known in [my town], so I feel like it’s a really good reference from him .... And then school, it’s just, like I said, it sets me up for the future as far as like a career to fall back on if I can’t decide what else I want to go to school for, or while I’m going to school for something bigger.”

### **Findings about identity to discourage and undermine redemption:**

Two examples of a contamination theme for woman with new arrests:

“My past mistakes do kind of hinder me, you know. I just, you know, I’ve lived the life of failure.”

“[I] could have done something better [with my life]” but “once I got caught up [with drug use and relationships with men], it was like a whole different path for me.”

**Findings about how probation and parole agents reinforce positive identity change:**

When others lauded women as redeemed or reformed by offering positive appraisals of their identity performances, women reported increased self-esteem and greater motivation to “keep up the good work.”

An example of how positive identity appraisal from parole officers affect women’s identity:

“[My parole officer would say] I’m so proud of you, I’m so proud .... [This motivated me] to continue on [the] path to success .... [This message from my parole officer] was ... like a burst of energy. That self-esteem boost you need from her and from within .... [I now have] the confidence to go back to school. Now I’m ready.”

**Recommendation for supervising agents, support staff, friends and family who want to promote positive identity change:**

- Parole agents can be an important source of identity verification that increases women’s self-esteem and motivates them to overcome barriers to desisting from crime.
- Parole agents can also fail to verify positive identity change, thereby promoting negative outcomes.
- Reminding women of their parolee identities can be stigmatizing and interfere with positive identity change.