

Exploring the Relationship Between Race, Drugs, and Motherhood Identity for Incarcerated Women



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Introduction

Background: Women have been the fastest growing incarcerated population since 1985 due to a range of policies aimed to be “tough” on crime⁽⁹⁾. Alongside the increasing numbers of incarcerated women is incarcerated mothers. In recent decades, it is estimated that the number of children with a mother in prison has more than doubled⁽¹⁰⁾. Therefore, countless women are separated from their families and must navigate motherhood within this unique context.

Research Question: What is the relationship between race, drug experiences, and motherhood identity for incarcerated women?

Literature

Motherhood Identity: Research suggests that 60% of incarcerated women are mothers of minor children⁽⁷⁾. Some of the women consider themselves good mothers based on their own standards: their love for their children and their efforts to protect, provide, and discipline them⁽²⁾. In their point of view, only those unable to do these tasks are bad mothers⁽²⁾. Incarcerated women deeply value their bond with their children and try to maintain contact and plan to reunite with their children upon their release⁽⁶⁾.

Race: The incarceration rate for African American women has been declining. Between 2000-2017, while the rate of imprisonment for White women increased by 44%, the rate for Black women decreased by 55%⁽¹⁰⁾. Some of the women’s ability to mother might be uniquely restricted dependent on their race/ethnicity “White mothers tend to receive less familial support and are more likely to be viewed as a caretaking ‘burden’ when compared with Hispanic and African American mothers”^(4, p. 147).

Drug Experiences: Most women’s incarceration is drug-related^(1, 4, 5). Drug-addicted mothers claim their motherhood identity is precious to them and they love their children. However, their addiction, which might have stemmed from previous trauma, serves as a coping strategy and may lead to guilt and shame^(2, 4).

Methods

Data Collection: Researchers interviewed the sample of incarcerated mothers using a semi-structured interview comprised of three major themes: (1) pre-prison parenting experiences and background, (2) in-prison parenting and other experiences, and (3) post-prison planning and views.

Data Analysis: The coding strategy involved an iterative process that included individual structured and open coding of 5 interviews, then meeting as a team to decide on consensus codes to add to a working codebook. This process continued for the next series of interviews, with the team iteratively adding codes, merging codes, and removing codes that were not relevant to the team’s research question until all interviews were coded. Consensus codes were added to NVIVO 12 for further coding and analysis.

Participants: The sample of mothers had a mean age of 44, a mean number of 3 children, and a majority (57%) had lived with and cared for their children before prison.

Sample Demographics (n=21)

Age	Age at First Child	Number of Children
Mean	44	Mean 20.2
Range	26-74	Range 1-5
Race	Minor Children	Offense Type
Black	38%	Yes 64%
White	62%	No 36%
Marital Status	Lived with & cared for	Offense Type
Single	43%	Yes – both 57%
Married/LTR	33%	Yes – reside only 5%
Divorced	14%	No 24%
Widowed	10%	N/A - pregnant 14%

Results

Figure 1. Motherhood Identity Thematic Map

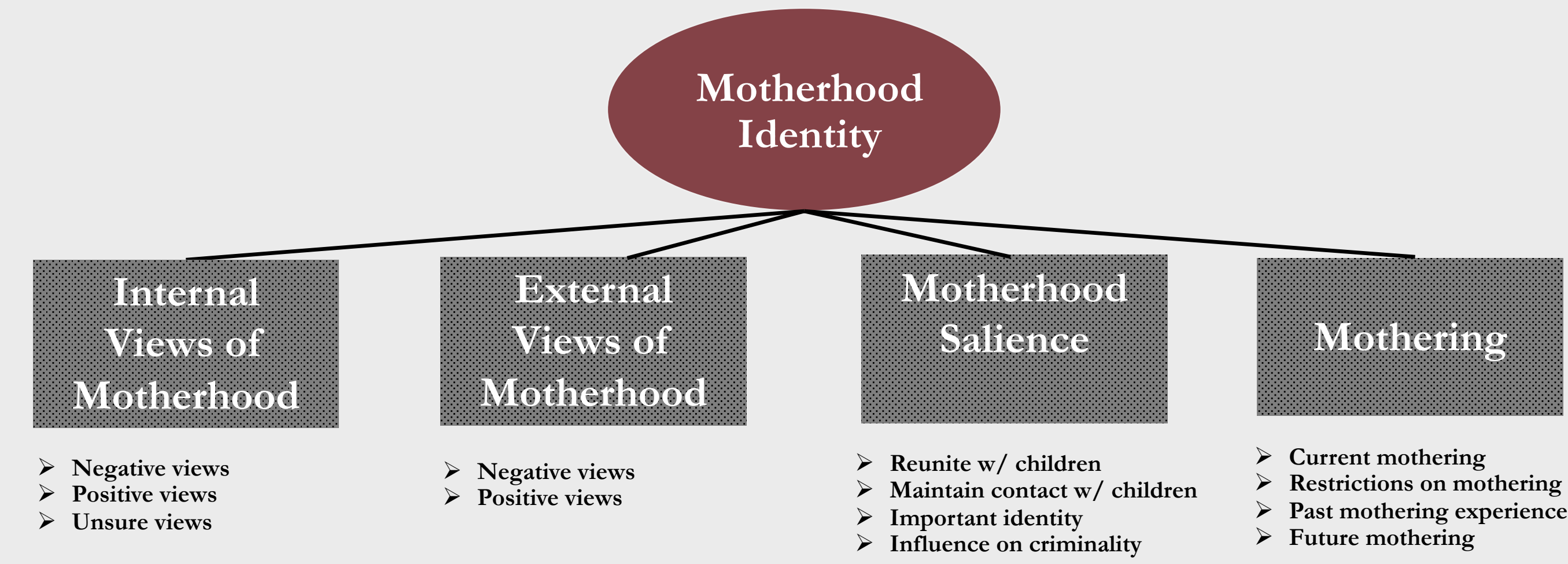


Figure 2. Motherhood Identity by Race of Mother

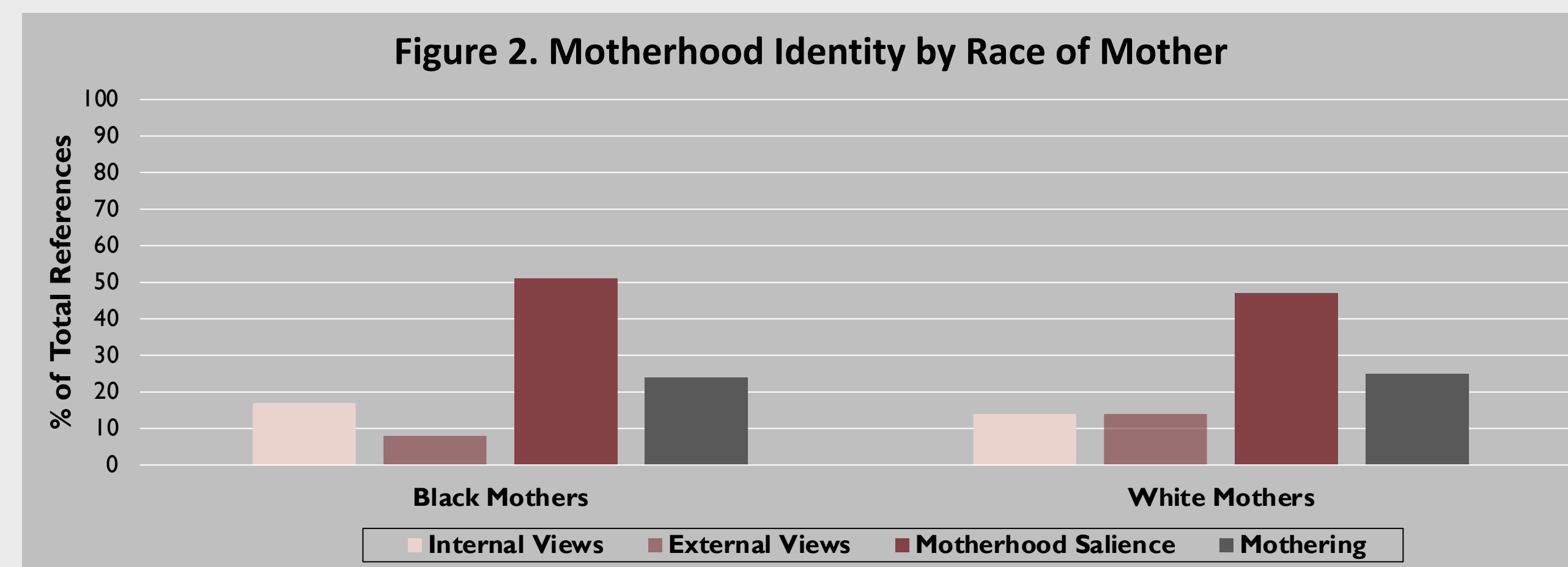


Table 1. Race of Mother by Motherhood Salience (n= 154 references)

Theme	Black Mothers	White Mothers	Total
Desire to maintain contact with children	7%	6%	7%
Desire to reunite with children	25%	23%	23%
Effort to maintain contact with children	42%	33%	35%
Motherhood important	12%	27%	23%
Motherhood influence on criminality	9%	6%	7%
Most important identity is mother	5%	5%	5%
Total	100% (n= 43 references)	100% (n= 111 references)	100%

Table 2. Race of Mother by Internal and External Views

Theme	Black Mothers	White Mothers	Total
Internal Views of Motherhood (n= 48 references)			
Positive	64%	56%	58%
Negative	36%	35%	35%
Unsure	--	9%	6%
External Views of Motherhood (n= 41 references)			
Positive	86%	65%	68%
Negative	14%	35%	32%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Figure 3. Drug-related Experiences Thematic Map

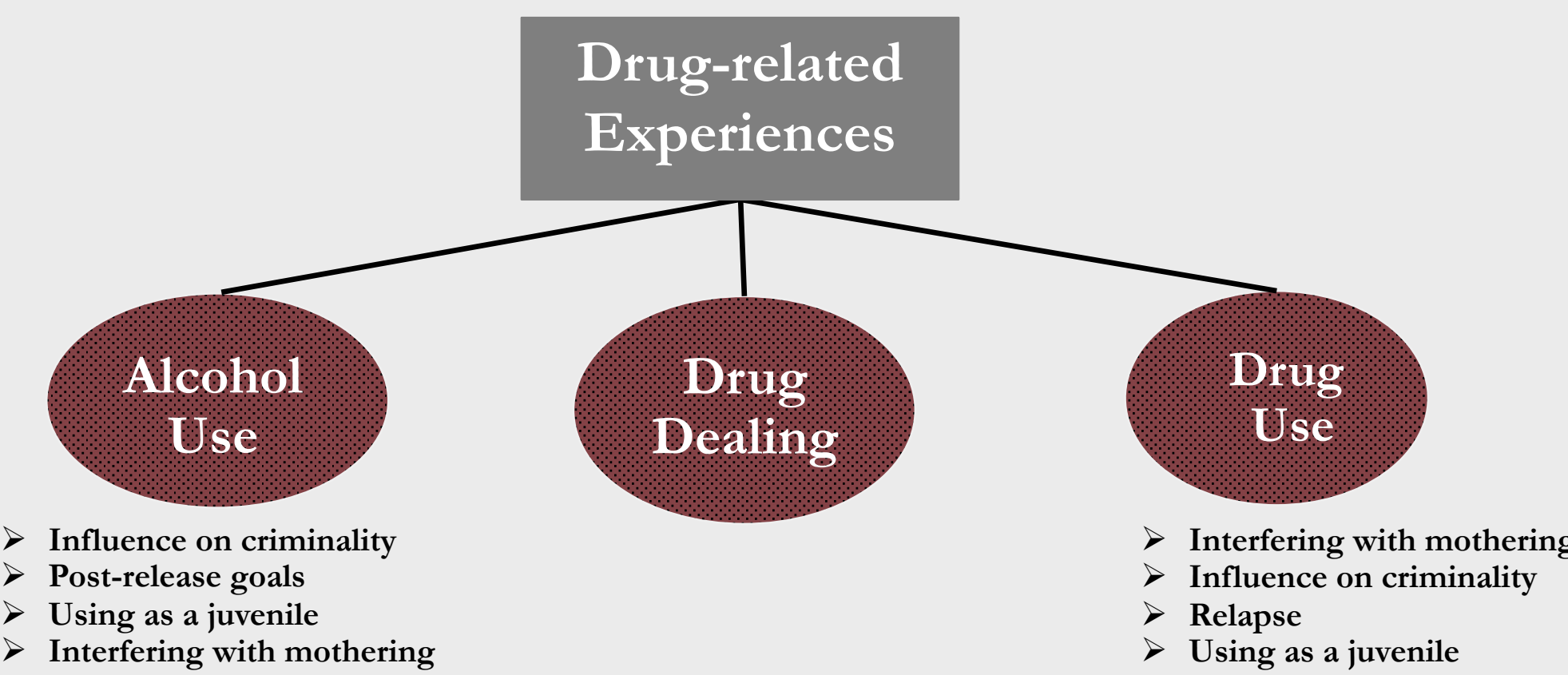


Figure 4. Drug-Related Experiences by Race of Mother

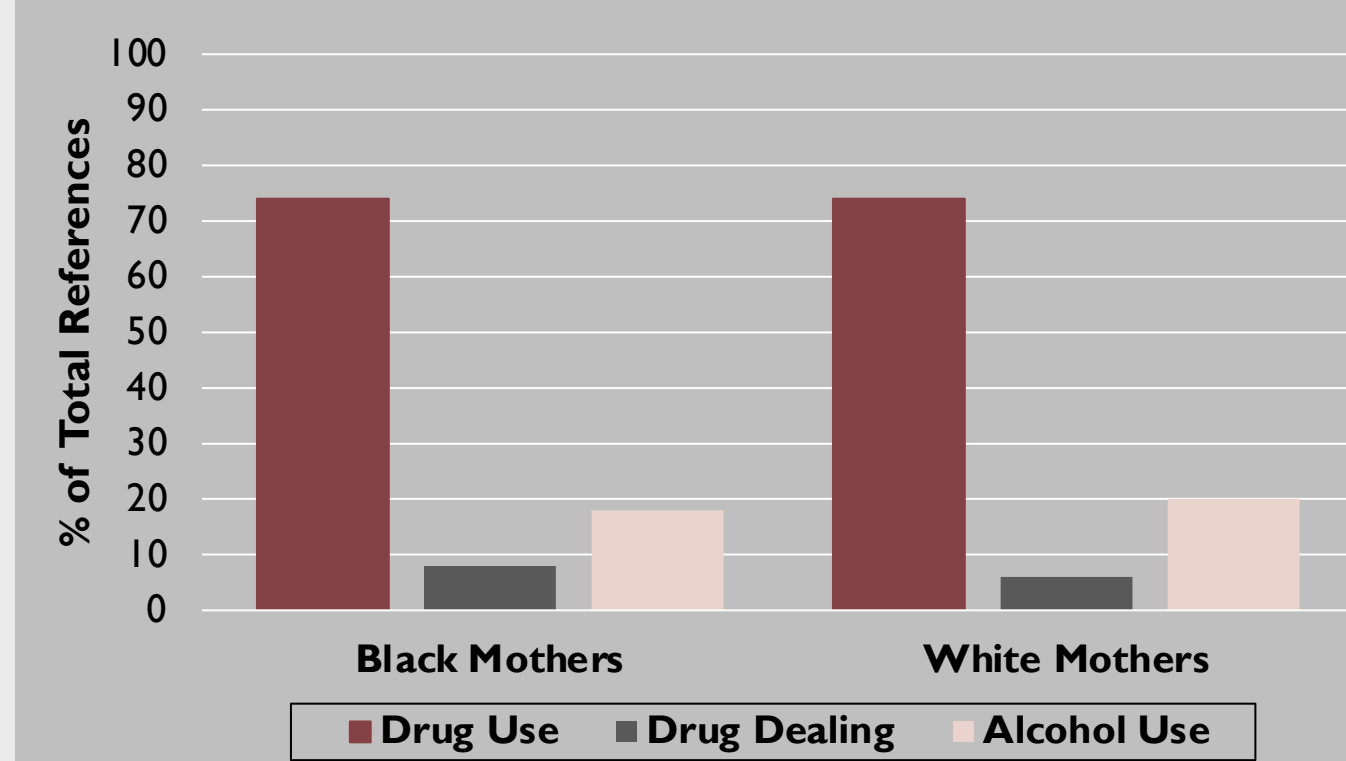


Table 3. Race of Mother by Drug Use (n= 43 references)

Theme	Black Mothers	White Mothers	Total
Drug use as a juvenile	0%	20%	14%
Drug relapse by mother	15%	7%	9%
Drug overdose by mother	0%	2%	2%
Influence on criminality	31%	13%	19%
Interference with mothering	15%	13%	14%
Drug-related post-release goals	39%	43%	42%
Total	100% (n= 13 references)	100% (n= 30 references)	100%

Discussion

Motherhood Identity and Race: “I’m a good—great mother. I put my children before me” - Amy, Black 40-year-old mother of 2 minor children

- Motherhood identity is a theme that is consistently discussed for Black and White incarcerated mothers; one mother explained motherhood as “[paving] the way for her children.”
- Overall, the percentage of Black and White mothers who referred to the motherhood salience (51%, 47%) and mothering (24%, 25%, respectively) thematic domains was very similar (see Figure 2).
- Motherhood salience, regardless of race, was the conceptual domain which was referenced most often by mothers in the sample. When examining this conceptual domain by race, more Black mothers (42%) than White mothers (33%) mentioned an effort to maintain contact with their children (see Table 1).
- As noted in Table 1, White mothers (27%) referenced that motherhood was important to them more than twice as frequently as Black mothers (12%).
- Both White and Black mothers had higher percentages of references to positive, internal views of their motherhood identity than negative, internal views of their motherhood identity. This is evidenced in many of the participant’s statements, such as “I love my children with everything I have” and “I think I was and am now an exceptional mother. I love my children. No past will dictate the mother I am to them.”
- Black mothers have a higher percentage of positive external views of motherhood references compared to White mothers (86% vs. 65%), while White mothers have a higher percentage of negative external views (see Table 2).

Drug Use and Race: “I feel like I’m a good mother but made bad choices like doing drugs, weed, and pills or not being there for them,” - Sarah, Black 30-year-old mother of 2 minor children

- Both Black and White mothers have intertwined experiences between their drug use and motherhood. There are similar numbers of drug use references between Black and White mothers (see Figure 4).
- Fifteen percent of the drug use references by Black mothers involved drug relapse compared to 7% for White mothers. White mothers (43%) had a higher percentage of references to their own drug use post-release goals than Black mothers (39%; see Table 3).
- Black mothers had higher percentages of references to their drug use influencing their criminality (31%) and interfering with their mothering (15%).
- Black mothers had no references to juvenile drug using, however, several White mothers referred to drug use as a juvenile (20%).
- One mother noted, “I feel like I have failed as a mom. My own parents picked drugs over me. I have done the same things to my kids,” which illustrates the often cyclical, intergenerational nature of drug abuse and addiction that many incarcerated mothers face.

Acknowledgements & References

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