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Inside the Lives of Mexican Origin Ex-Convicts: Pre- and Post-Incarceration

Yok-Fong Paat[1]
The University of Texas at El Paso, United States
Trina L Hope
University of Oklahoma, United States
Hector Zamora
The University of Texas at El Paso, United States
Laura C Lopez
The University of Texas at El Paso, United States
Christian M Salas
The University of Texas at El Paso, United States

Abstract

Using in-depth interviews, this study examined the social upbringing, subjective experiences and coping mechanisms of Mexican origin ex-convicts before and after their incarceration. Overall, our participants experienced multiple structural disadvantages prior to and following incarceration. Many grew up in environments with little social control—lacking good parenting or role models—and embedded in communities of concentrated poverty and criminality. Many also disclosed their struggles to survive, lack of positive influences and legitimate/constructive coping mechanisms. Contrary to public stereotypes that Mexican origin ex-convicts are hardcore criminals, many were convicted of non-violent drug-related charges and the majority aspired to a crime-free future. To reduce recidivism and minimize future re-offending, we suggest that clinical practitioners, social service providers and policy planners address the aforementioned needs and challenges that contributed to ex-convicts getting in trouble with the law to begin with.

Introduction

The era of mass incarceration, characterized by a disproportionate growth in ethnic minority arrests in the United States, is a phenomenon of significant concern (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People 2017; The Sentencing Project 2017). In response to the implementation of the modern drug war and the movement toward 'tough on crime' sentencing, the prison population has grown steadily over the past 35 years (Drug Policy Alliance 2016). In 2015, the Bureau of Justice Statistics estimated that the United States (US) held over two million prisoners under the jurisdiction of local, state and federal correctional facilities (of which non-white offenders were over-represented), an increase of 11.7 per cent from the estimate for year 2000 (Carson and Anderson 2016; Kaeble and Glaze 2016). Unfortunately, this boom in incarceration has not been accompanied by an increase in programs designed to make the process of integration easier for those who have paid their debt to society (Geiger 2006; see also US Department of Justice 2017). In light of this, it is not surprising that, despite over 650,000 ex-offenders being released from correctional facilities every year (US Department of Justice n.d.), over two-thirds are re-arrested within three years of release, and more than three-quarters of them return within five years (Durose, Copper and Synder 2014).

Racial disparities in criminal sentencing have been documented nationwide, with studies on high rates of African American incarceration receiving considerable attention. Few studies, however, focus on Hispanic origin offenders, who currently constitute the fastest growing population in the prison system and, in some cases, receive harsher sentences than African American offenders (Mauer and King 2007; Nellis 2016; Steffensmeier and Demuth 2000). As of 2015, the US Census Bureau estimated that 63.4 per cent (close to 36 million) of Hispanics in the US were of Mexican descent, the largest Hispanic subgroup (Flores 2017; US Census Bureau 2017). Further, according to the Federal Bureau of Prisons (2018a), Mexican inmates constitute the largest group of foreign prisoners (12.4 per cent in 2018) in the US. Hispanics, who made up 17.3 per cent of the country's population in 2014 (Stepler and Brown 2016) and, in 2018, comprised 32.5 per cent of the federal inmate population (Federal Bureau of Prisons 2018b), are incarcerated at nearly three times the rate of white people (Carson and Anderson 2016), Despite this fact, studies that attempt to capture the life course cumulative disadvantages that Hispanic-origin ex-convicts must confront remain limited, and studies of Mexican origin ex-convicts are almost non-existent, making it difficult to gauge the needs of this underserved population.

Using in-depth interviews, this study examined the pre-conviction social upbringing, subjective experiences, coping mechanisms, challenges looking forward and post-incarceration prospects for Mexican origin ex-convicts, one of the most socially marginalized segments of the nation's population. In this article, we first present a review of the social learning, social control and strain literature guiding our study framework, noting the (relatively rare) prior research speaking specifically to the experiences of Hispanics. Next, we detail our methods and analytical approach prior to discussing our findings in light of the current literature and practical implications.

Incarceration: How did they get there?

Social learning

Akers's social learning theory, which is built on four premises—differential association, definitions, differential reinforcement and imitation—can be used to understand the learning processes and criminal opportunities of individuals. Specifically, through *differential association*—the context and exposure to attitudes or behaviors in the learning repertoire—*definitions* are attached to behaviors of varying degrees of influence. But *imitation*, emulation through observation, only takes place following the calculation of anticipated rewards or consequences, provided that positive effects exceed the negative consequences, a process called *differential reinforcement* (Akers 1985, 2009, 2012). Although social learning theorists contend that the impact of contact may vary contingent upon these four elements, association with primary groups such as family and peers plays a critical role in the learning process, since the

strength of these social ties are typically stronger (Akers 2009; Akers and Sellers 2004). Child development research, for example, has long documented the significance of family upbringing on child conduct, moral development and resilience (Johnson et al. 2017; Luthar 2015). Family violence, including childhood maltreatment and exposure to inter-parental violence, has been linked to greater risk for behavioral maladjustment (Currie and Tekin 2012; Savage, Palmer and Martin 2014; Vidal et al. 2017). But, parenting does not happen in a social vacuum, because residence in poverty- and crime-ridden neighborhoods can undermine constructive parenting and facilitate the learning of delinquent behaviors as youths adopt antisocial norms by befriending others who support such behaviors (Deutsch et al. 2012; Jocson and McLoyd 2015). Research using Hispanic samples suggests that exposure to deviant peers increases substance abuse, antisocial behaviors and externalizing behaviors (Mrug et al. 2014; Pokhrel et al. 2013). Additionally, as individuals age and become less dependent on their family of origin, secondary and reference groups including peers, mass media and the internet/social media may become common objects of imitation (for example, Allen et al. 2012; Ko et al. 2009).

Social control

According to the social control theory postulated by Hirschi (1969), deviant behaviors are likely to take place unless constrained. In his theory, Hirschi identified four concepts (attachment, commitment, involvement and belief) which can be used to gauge the significance of bonding in social control. Specifically, *attachment* to others (for example, parents, teachers, friends) increases conformity via fear of jeopardizing important social relationships. *Commitment* to conventional goals provides a stake in conformity that gives individuals more to lose if they engage in deviance. Individuals who support or internalize conventional *beliefs* and who are actively *involved* in conventional activities have less time or motivation for deviant activities (Hirschi 1969). From a familial perspective, parents' transmission of prosocial values and investment of time increases rule-abiding behaviors and reduces criminality. Lack of effective parental monitoring, discipline strategies and family processes, on the contrary, are predictive of a range of delinquent and criminal acts (for example, Criss et al. 2013; Harris, Vazsonyi and Bolland 2017; Schofield, Conger and Robins 2015).

A number of studies have tested concepts from the social control theory with Hispanic samples. Studies show that parental measures of social control (for example, monitoring, attachment, time spent with parents) reduce the risk of delinquent/deviant behaviors among Hispanic/Mexican origin youth (Alvarez-Rivera and Fox 2010; Germán, Gonzales and Dumka 2009; Miller et al. 2008). Schofield et al. (2015) found that parental monitoring moderated the effects of deviant peers on both intent to use, and actual use of, alcohol, tobacco and other drugs: that is, the effects of deviant peers on substance use was weaker for youth with high parental supervision. There is evidence that many offenders lack mentors or role models to provide informal bridging and bonding social capital or social ties that link them to critical resources in life (Salmi and Kivivuori 2006). When ethnicity is considered, ethnic minorities tend to cluster in low income neighborhoods with significantly fewer opportunities for upward mobility and economic advancement (see Cubbin et al. 2008; Hughey et al. 2016). And, not surprisingly, highly disadvantaged and segregated neighborhoods are likely to impede the formation of strong ties necessary to combat crime (Sampson 2004; Sturgis et al. 2013).

Some studies of Hispanic/Mexican origin youth have related the concept of 'familism' to social control theory, pointing out that the traditional cultural emphasis on family closeness, loyalty and support acts as a protective factor against deviance (for example, Germán et al. 2009; Santisteban et al. 2012). As Germán et al. (2009: 18) pointed out, '[i]t is expected that familism values operate to cement strong bonds of attachment to the family unit and ensure that the family continues to be a strong source of support and guidance even as developing adolescents become increasingly involved with peers and activities outside the home'. Indeed, a number of studies (for example, those by Germán et al. 2009; Marsiglia, Parsai and Kulis 2009; Stein et al. 2015) has found that

higher levels of familism tend to be associated with lower levels of deviant behaviors and poor psychosocial outcomes.

Strain

Merton (1938) argued that deviant acts are adaptive responses to strain resulting from the imbalance between aspirations to succeed and the availability of legitimate modes to succeed, a state that he termed 'cultural chaos' or anomie. Without a lawful opportunity structure to facilitate attainment of upward mobility, Merton postulated that individuals are compelled to deviance (Merton 1938, 1957). Discrepancies between means and ends are affected by elements such as the social class system and differing levels of 'anomie-induced strain' in American society that stresses achievement over employment of legitimate means (see Akers and Sellers 2004). In contrast to Merton, the general strain theory (GST) postulated by Agnew identified three types of strain: the 'failure to achieve positively valued goals'; the 'removal of positively valued stimuli'; and the 'presentation of negatively valued stimuli' (Agnew 1992: 47). Further, Agnew asserted that strain is more conducive to criminal coping if the cost of crime is low and if the strainful experience is accompanied by negative emotions such as anger, frustration, depression, or fear. Additionally, the propensity for criminal coping increases if strain is perceived to be high in magnitude, chronic and unjust, as corrective action is utilized to escape the negative stimuli (Agnew 2006, 2009a, 2009b, 2013). Indeed, empirical research (for example, Jang 2007; Wallace, Patchin and May 2005; see also Agnew 2006, 2013) suggests that some situations (such as family violence, long-term unemployment and criminal victimization) increase susceptibility to criminal coping, with males and females experiencing strain differently. Others also found that exposure to varying types of strain (for example, structural discrimination) partially explained the differences in criminal coping for some racial groups or communities (Kaufman et al. 2008; see also Agnew 1999).

Tests of strain theory with Hispanic samples are rare but available results suggest that the theory is applicable to this population. Analyzing data from a sample of southwestern Mexican American adolescents to replicate Piquero and Sealock's (2000) test of Broidy and Agnew's (1997) gender/strain hypothesis, Jennings et al. (2009) found mixed results. But, as stated by them, 'the majority were consistent with the theoretical assumptions and the empirically-derived expectations of GST ... Perhaps, more importantly, the results from a sample of southwestern Mexican American adolescents revealed a relatively strong degree of consistency with earlier gender/GST findings' (Jennings et al. 2009: 414). Next, Cudmore, Cuevas and Sabina (2015) found that strain theory helped to explain the relationship between polyvictimization and delinquency among a national sample of Latino youth. Other studies with Hispanic samples have also found support for the applicability of general strain theory to this population (see Hoskin 2013; Pérez, Jennings and Gover 2008; Rodriguez and Belshaw 2010).

Post-incarceration: What happened next?

Stigma, barriers and maladjustment

Stigma disqualifies many ex-offenders from gaining full acceptance into larger society post-incarceration (Chui and Cheng 2013; Geiger 2006; Young and Powell 2015). Ex-offenders with low levels of educational attainment and irregular work experience (Harlow 2003; Stafford 2006), for example, face poor work prospects and scarce job availability in the lower tiers of the segmented economy (Bumiller 2015). Some research found that duration of imprisonment is negatively associated with employment opportunities and earnings, and with social networks that promote employability and social bonding (Alvarez and Loureiro 2012; see also Archer and Williams 2006), in part because employers may be reluctant to hire those with criminal records (Visher, Debus-Sherrill and Yahner 2011; Young and Powell 2015). In the health domain, adjustment issues may emerge among ex-convicts following long-term exposure to negative stimuli (for example, prison gang culture, prison crowding and family break-up) during imprisonment, while mental health issues (for example, seclusion, withdrawal) or physical illness

(for example HIV/AIDS), which are often not treated in prison or during parole, may worsen (for example, Maruschak 2006; Snyder et al. 2009; Visher et al. 2011; Worrall and Morris 2012). Consequently, the lack of knowledge on how to integrate into mainstream society causes some to become dependent on the prison system to regulate their behaviors, a phenomenon termed 'prisonization' (Clemmer 1940). Because most ex-convicts are not eligible to receive social services and housing assistance, many are left without tangible or intangible support upon completion of their prison sentences (Archer and Williams 2006; Crampton 2015). Thus, ex-offenders from minority population groups especially, encounter double jeopardy and goal blockages due to their ascribed identity, added structural barriers and racial discrimination not encountered by their white counterparts.

Turning points

To successfully desist from crime, ex-offenders must learn to combat substance abuse, disconnect from antisocial networks, and break away from other habits that lead to criminal coping (Serin and Lloyd 2009). Existing evidence has found that strong family ties and a stable work history decrease recidivism (acting as potential 'turning points') (Bachman et al. 2015; Berg and Huebner 2011; Cid and Martí 2012; Sampson and Laub 2005). Several scenarios are plausible. First, due to added parental responsibility, parents may be more hesitant to re-offend. Second, a close marriage to a non-deviant partner, who models prosocial behaviors, helps ex-offenders with positive identity transformation (Sampson and Laub 2005). Ex-offenders with family support may be more optimistic and confident about the future. Additionally, ex-offenders may rely on family members as useful networks to find employment, and employers may be more likely to hire ex-offenders if they have social ties to the family (see Berg and Huebner 2011). Lastly, it is possible that ex-offenders who are employed may count on their families to provide financial, emotional and childcare help. These relations, taken together, help to facilitate post-confinement adjustment and offer ex-offenders a better chance to start over, thus decreasing their likelihood of re-offending.

Method

Using in-depth interviews, this study examined the life experiences (as told to the researchers) of 17 formerly incarcerated Mexican origin ex-offenders prior to and following their incarceration. With permission from the university institutional review board, the participants, recruited using purposive sampling from a halfway house in Texas, US, were invited to participate in this study to investigate the life experiences and current prospects of recently released federal inmates. Although the participants' ethnic classification and experiences with stress were used as primary recruitment criteria during the screening process, the participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and would not interfere with their current supervised release case. Overall, the average age of the participants was 31 years, and over half of the participants were male (58.8 per cent). Additionally, apart from two participants, all the ex-offenders had at least one drug-related charge (for example, drug trafficking, importation, possession and conspiracy) or a combination of drug related and other charges, with sometimes discontinuous sentence lengths as long as 12 years. With respect to the participants' education, one had a bachelor's degree, one had an associate degree, three had not graduated from high school, and the remaining had either a General Education Diploma (a high school equivalency certificate) or finished some vocational training or college classes. To facilitate the process of data analysis, each semi-structured, open-ended interview, which took 45 minutes to an hour, primarily in English, was transcribed verbatim.

Our data analysis using Nvivo was guided by the grounded theory method, which is used for theory development of phenomena based on available data and observation (Corbin and Strauss 2007). First, interview transcripts were reviewed repeatedly to detect commonality and consistency prior to establishing our coding scheme and organizing our data using a systematic filing system. In-depth analysis was then used to identify patterns of concepts that emerged and

their relationship with other relevant constructs. Finally, our theoretical findings were compared with the findings from the prior literature to establish plausible connections and explanations (Berg 2007). Because our participants were recruited from a convenience sample, we make no claims of generalizability; rather the primary aim of our study was to explore the participants' perceptions of their life experiences, in their own words. Pseudonyms were used to protect the participants' identities and the confidentiality of the interviews.

Findings

Three major themes emerged: childhood upbringing, role models and parental control; relative deprivation, strain and coping mechanisms; and looking to the future—insights and aspirations. Table 1 shows the relevant categories, subcategories, themes and illustrative text of the interviews.

Table 1: Categories, subcategories, themes and illustrative text

Sub-categories	Themes or illustrative text
Childhood upbringing, role models and parental control	
Broken households Substandard living environment Lack of conventional role models Adverse childhood experiences Delinquent peers	Family disruption/domestic violence/parental absenteeism/family relational strain
	Participants grew up in poverty-stricken or crime-ridden neighborhoods
	Participants disclosed receiving inconsistent, abusive and/or poor parenting strategies growing up
	Parents and peers offered bad examples and modeling
	'My brother was my buddy, my crime partner' Intergenerational engagement in criminal activities
Relative deprivation, strain and coping mechanisms	
Job discrimination Public stigma Racial prejudice Structural disadvantages Financial strain Family conflicts Poor coping strategies	'Manager kind of gave me a funny look when I told them my conviction'
	Ex-convicts' characters and appearance were judged harshly by the general public
	'Mexicans are the new blacks. So it has affected me negatively, definitely'
	Some participants had strained relationship with their family (for example, encountered ridicules, belittling and harsh remarks)
	Participants turned to substance, denial, depression, aggression and violence to manage stress prior to incarceration
	Most participants understood the need to restrain themselves from poor coping strategies (for example, substance usage) to cope with stress for fear of jeopardizing their supervised release requirement
Looking to the future: Insights and aspirations	
Pre- and post-incarceration beliefs, perceptions and hopes	Participants discussed their appreciation for current freedom
	Some participants related their life aspirations to material possessions prior to incarceration
	Incarceration was an 'eye-opening' life event for the participants
	'I've humbled myself to what I have'
	The participants weighed the pros and cons of their criminal engagement
	The participants were hopeful for their future

Childhood upbringing, role models and parental control

Growing up, many participants lived very chaotic lives. A number described strained relationships with their families and lack of support systems they could count on. Some had family members who were either previously incarcerated or had engaged in law-breaking behaviors. Others were raised in single parent or grandparent-headed households, and a number grew up in poverty-stricken and/or crime-ridden neighborhoods. Asked if many of her friends or family members engaged in law-breaking activities, 23-year-old Lorena, who had been incarcerated twice, spoke of family members she grew up with, but with whom she had not had contact with since her second release:

> All my family ... My mom has a record too for doing the same thing I did [smuggling marijuana across the border]. I guess it's on the family tree. My uncle as well ... My mom has a felony, my uncles have ... state felonies. My dad has just a couple DWI [driving while intoxicated] stuff like that ... In my grandma's house, my uncles were all involved in something, especially one of my uncles, he's involved in gangs and ... drug scene and all of that.

Twenty-six-year-old Lucas had been in and out of the prison system since the age of 18. Despite close brotherly ties, his brother did not lead him down the path to becoming a law-abiding member of society: 'My brother was my buddy, my crime partner. We used to do lots of dose [drugs] to get it [high] and he passed away'. While proud to leave his previous identity as a gang member behind, Lucas was part of the gang rivalry that caused his neighborhood turmoil and violence in his early adulthood.

Sometimes violence occurred in the household as well. Thirty-seven-year-old Yasmin had been a widow for the past two decades, but her marriage was a break from her childhood family violence. She revealed the parental violence that caused her to leave home many years earlier to marry her drug-abusing husband: 'I was the oldest one ... there was a lot of family violence between my mom and my dad ... And there was a lot of stress right there ... My dad used to hit mom and my mom used to hit him back. I used to see all [of] that'. Twenty-eight-year-old Jorge, a second-generation Mexican immigrant who served two years in prison for drug trafficking, also depicted the dysfunctional relationship he shared with his Mexico-born parents:

> Very distant ... my mother was a very loving person at a young age. But I think my father's stupidity and machismo ... maybe and ... other things that he did ended up causing ... her mental deterioration. But early on in life, she was very loving, a very good mother. As we started growing up, maybe middle school was when she was becoming very distant and so were we ... My father was only there to force and to try to mold us into what he believed were the right Christians.

Sometimes, due to a lack of trust between the participants and their caregivers, they felt compelled to turn to friends for emotional support, especially when parental support failed. However, not all friends exerted a positive influence. Asked to describe his friends, 33-year-old Dylan illustrated: 'Well, my friends were involved in some of the stuff [illegal activities] that I was doing ... they were ... part of it, so they have ... the same thought process'.

Next, we asked the participants to describe their childhood role model(s), but to our surprise, many confessed that they did not have anyone whom they admired or looked up to. As 42-year-old Anthony, convicted of a sex crime that he refused to discuss, pointed out: 'Role models, no ... I really can't say. Role models did not really have a place in my life'. For the few who acknowledged having a role model growing up, the character or reasons for admiration of the role model were sometimes questionable. Asked why he perceived the rapper Eminem as his role model, Dylan replied: 'I went through a lot of stuff that he rapped about'. Dylan described how he and the best-

selling rapper seemingly shared many common experiences: 'It's just about situations that he rapped about [that] I went through ... like his girlfriend cheating on him, like I caught my baby's mom [in high school] cheating on me. That was a lot of crazy stuff. So, I listened to a lot of his music'. Growing up with parents who showed very little interest in his upbringing, Jorge also recounted how his older brother had become his inspiration: 'He was more aggressive. He was no bullshit. He was very serious. He is wise. What I'm mean wise is ... he is really not wise, but he is. He is very short-tempered too, very angry. But he wouldn't take shit from nobody. So he was my role model growing up'.

Consistent parenting was sometimes non-existent for participants who were raised in different cultural contexts from their parents/caregivers, grew up in large households, and/or experienced family disruption/parental absenteeism. If any type of parental control was in place for these participants, it was frequently depicted as overly lax, too strict, irregular or ineffective. Asked to describe the type of parental discipline he received growing up, Jorge, a father of two, told his story:

> My father would try shit that he learnt in the army, in the Mexican army, really stupid things that you would do to a kid ... My mother was a beater. She would grab anything and everything and just hit us with it. My father would do more like psychological fuck type shit with us ... We would face the wall on one foot with our hand behind our back, [and] not being able to move for hours. If we move, he would hit us for hours, fucking idiot ... That was his main one. Or he would just lock us in our room ... like for fucking days ... two days, he just locked us in the room and [wouldn't] let us out.

Likewise, 27-year-old Rebecca, a mother of three who was raised by her maternal grandmother and also grew up in her father's family, told of the stark differences in discipline between these two households. 'With my mom's side, my grandmother would beat me and ... with my dad, there was no type of discipline. There is no discipline'. When asked for clarification about the harsh physical discipline she encountered at her grandmother's house, Rebecca responded:

> Well, I could get beat up for everything, you know? And I got to the point to where I used to wish that my grandma [would] die because she would beat me up so much. You know, it was like constant every day. Everything was if I didn't do it right, she would beat me. If I talked back, she would beat me, you know? So everything ... I was scared of even living, you know what I mean, because there was a physical thing. But with my dad, once I went to my dad ... I had no discipline, no rules, no, nothing.

Parental substance abuse could cloud judgment and inhibit effective parenting. Even though her parents had long divorced, Lorena, who had five siblings, recalled her traumatic childhood:

> My mom used to do, I wouldn't say beat us, but she used to whip us pretty good ... Her favorite was the belt ... But I wouldn't say [she] beat us to abuse but she would hit us ... My dad ... he already hit us but sometimes when he [got] drunk and [got] mad then we would see phones flying and all kinds of things, but mostly would come from my mom ... throwing split woods ... slapping books. I remembered me and my brother ... we would hide under the bed when she came home really drunk. If she came home happy, then she'd be on the wine, but if she came home mad then we would have to hide or pretend to be asleep.

Relative deprivation, strain and coping mechanisms

The concept of relative deprivation offered a glimpse into the participants' perceptions of life quality before and after their incarceration by capturing their feelings of injustice and inadequacy compared to the reference group of their choice. Job discrimination, public stigma, racial prejudice, structural disadvantages, financial strain and family conflicts were among the many challenges that the participants faced before and/or after incarceration. When asked about the coping mechanisms they relied on before their conviction, many of our participants claimed that, to cope with stress and pain in life, they would resort to substance abuse, negative emotions and avoidance. Marisela spoke on the topic of drinking to deal with stress: 'I was drowning myself in alcohol, my sorrow … I guess not accomplishing the stuff that I wanted to do'. Although he became moody or easily angered during stressful times, Pablo, who started smoking marijuana at the age of 12 years, described dealing with stress only slightly differently: 'I would probably just blow it off and, like I said, putting things off for later, saying I won't deal with that right now, or walking away from situations as opposed to taking ahead on, [I] would walk away and, like I said, abuse alcohol and drugs'. In addition to getting more 'wild' tattoos, violence was one strategy that Jorge used to cope with his anger: 'My first conviction, I would just act angry … I would either go from an aggressive person to a passive aggressive. Then … I would still resolve that … with violence'.

Very few participants had a support system (for example, family members, significant others or friends) that could help them cope legitimately. Fortunately, many realized the importance of staying clean as part of their supervised release requirements. Jorge illustrated his experience:

> I used to use drugs just for the purposes. I would smoke marijuana when I needed to relax. If I needed to stay awake and be more attentive, I would either ingest cocaine or methamphetamine … And right now that I'm facing these stresses, I feel like 'fuck man … I would like to enjoy some … alcohol. I'd like to enjoy some of these, but I can't because I have [supervised release] restrictions.

Some participants also spoke highly of a life-changing experience that served as a deterrence of criminal coping. For example, Marisela, who was pregnant when interviewed, was mindful about her impending motherhood and grateful for her husband's strong support. For the participants who had served long sentences, the sole form of support remaining—if any at all—was from family members. Many of the participants, who had either lost most of their friends due to incarceration or were trying to stay away from peer pressure, were able to find comfort within their family group. But, not all families were sufficiently understanding to be helpful, such as Rebecca's. She commented:

> I mean, they're trying to help, you know? It's just the fact that they haven't been around me and I haven't been around them and … my family has always been judgmental and they don't know how to be positive … 'Oh, you're so stupid!' … I just rather not but they're trying to and because of their past and what they said to me or my brother [who is] also a convict, I just rather stay away … It's just another stress … I get aggravated and frustrated and like they don't understand, you know? But I mean they're trying.

Seclusion was also used as a stress reliever, as Jessica noted: 'When I'm all by myself, I just get in my car and take off and go cry my head off … until I calm down and then I go back home'. But unlike Jessica, Yasmin was more reserved about sharing her feelings:

> I'm the kind of person that when I have a problem, I just stick it to myself. I don't speak. I don't say anything. I just close myself. Why? Because back then I used to … talk to somebody and when they got mad at you, just threw it in your face and I'm the kind of person, that's done. That's the first and last time I'll say how I feel.

Sometimes, not sharing was a protective strategy that was forced on the participants for fear of jeopardizing the relationship they had with their loved ones. Contemplating their future to calm themselves down or meditating on the problem were strategies that were rarely used by most participants.

The future: Insights and aspirations

Because insights are potentially useful in predicting the risk of future re-offending, we asked the participants to compare how their beliefs, perceptions and aspirations (with respect to education, money and success) have changed post-incarceration. The majority of the participants indicated they had matured, and many claimed that incarceration was an eye-opening experience. Dylan, who served a five-year sentence due to drug conspiracy, shared his perspective:

> I used to take money [for granted] ... I wanted the best of everything and I had the best of everything because I was making so much money off the drugs ... I've really lived a majority of the lifestyles I think but my thought process was very different. I didn't go to church, I was just selling or transporting marijuana in trailer, stocked it in my house, and transporting it and just getting like thousands and thousands of dollars at the time ... So, at that time of my life, I was like, 'Oh, yeah', and money was coming in from everywhere and I had everything, you know.

Likewise, Pablo, who spent approximately four years intermittently incarcerated, revealed his circumstance prior to his first arrest:

> To be honest to you, I don't think I had any short-term or long-term goals at that time because I was selling drugs and I was doing well. I wasn't really looking ahead. I was just living life, taking it day by day and just making money and spending money. I was eating whatever I wanted to eat, taking trips to wherever I wanted to go, and just living life. I think goals and aspirations were which car was I going to buy next, which trip was I going to take next ... Let's go try some restaurants I hadn't eaten yet. Those were basically my aspirations.

At the time of the interview, going back to school, working a legitimate job, and paying child support were definitely part of Pablo's future plans. He noted the change: 'I ain't going back to prison, so I definitely can't go back to what I was doing. So now, I'm thinking I need to get further educated and try to do the right thing as opposed to doing the wrong thing before I went to prison'.

In addition to their intentions to stay out of prison, many were cautious about not getting into trouble with the law. Many more were more appreciative of their current freedom and the people around them. Following his first release from the Federal Bureau of Prisons, Dylan described how his beliefs about life in general have changed:

> I've humbled myself to what I have ... and I see a different point because I can be fine one day ... and ... get taken away and put in jail ... away from my family and my kids, you know ... There was some guy ... 'Hey man, let's do this, and this'... 'No, I don't do that anymore, man. I already have been there and done that and it's not worth it'. And the guy was like, 'Come on, man, you did it before'. 'Yeah, one time and I already did five years for that, you know. I'm not going to do it again'.

Thirty-nine-year-old Daniel, who was incarcerated over a total of eight years, shared similar insights: 'When I got locked up, I had so much time to think about life, the little things that I didn't really consider ... I was messing [around] ... I think this is an eye opener for myself to not be taking things for granted'. Despite the grim statistics on recidivism rates and the challenges our

participants would inevitably face as they tried to reintegrate back into society, we were impressed with the hopeful optimism of these men and women.

Discussion and conclusion

Incarceration exerts a devastating impact on individuals and communities alike (Clear, Rose and Ryder 2001; Drakulich et al. 2012; Young and Powell 2015). Currently, the lack of quality data collected from institutionalized populations prevents us from fully understanding the cumulative disadvantages that ex-offenders of Hispanic/Mexican origin are confronting and the legitimate coping mechanisms available for them before and after their incarceration. Additionally, first-hand information, which is based on qualitative data collection techniques that allow minority ex-offenders to describe their experiences 'in their own words', is particularly rare. Built on prominent criminological theories (that is, social learning, social control and strain) and relevant concepts (stigma and 'turning points'), this study examined the challenges that Mexican origin ex-offenders faced over their life course.

Overall, the Mexican origin ex-offenders we interviewed experienced multiple structural disadvantages before and after incarceration. First, many of our participants grew up in family environments with little social control—lacking good parenting or role models—and embedded in communities of concentrated poverty and criminality. Next, many described struggling to survive and lacking positive influences or legitimate/constructive coping mechanisms. Few made a legitimate living or had access to opportunities for upward mobility during their formative years. Further, contrary to public stereotypes that Mexican origin ex-convicts are hardcore criminals, many were convicted of non-violent drug related charges and the majority of our participants aspired to a crime-free future.

In sum, the life-long stigma that practically every criminal conviction carries can hinder ex-offender re-entry into mainstream society as they confront barriers in the legitimate economy, while also facing considerable social exclusion and marginalization (Geiger 2006; Young and Powell 2015). Inability to cope legitimately can lead to the adoption of unhealthy solutions and even re-engagement in criminal activities (Agnew 1992, 2006, 2009a, 2009b, 2013).

Our research efforts generated rich information about the Mexican origin ex-convicts' life experiences and the challenges they confronted. In spite of these important insights, our study is not without limitations. Like any qualitative study and also due to our small sample size, our observations cannot be generalized to the broader population of ex-offenders. Furthermore, given that we focused on participants who were able to converse in English fluently, we may have gained different insights had we interviewed ex-offenders who were not fluent in English.

To reduce recidivism and minimize future re-offending, we suggest that clinical practitioners, social service providers and policy planners address the aforementioned needs and challenges that contributed to Mexican origin ex-convicts' adverse encounters with the law. While not all Mexican origin ex-convicts are immigrants, accessing their acculturative levels (for example, language proficiency) and level of integration (for example, sense of belonging) before and after incarceration may be necessary in designing a culturally sensitive treatment plan. More fruitful approaches may involve humanizing contact and diverting offenders to treatment or ecologically-based case management rather than more jail time, while concurrently formulating responsive policies to enhance ex-offenders' reintegration and reduce structural disadvantages to address area poverty. Mexican origin ex-convicts face many of the same challenges that all offenders face upon release, as most of our participants' prior convictions and prison experiences illustrate. To break away from the cycle of recidivism, ex-convicts who have paid their debt to society by serving their prison sentences deserve a new life free from public stigma (Gerlach 2006). When their chance of successful re-entry is enhanced, their likelihood of recidivism will decrease.

Correspondence: Yok-Fong Paat, Assistant Professor, Social Work, 500 W University Avenue, The University of Texas at El Paso, El Paso Texas 79968, United States. Email: ypaat@utep.edu

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