The second decade of the twenty-first century was an exciting time for correctional reformers with a focus on women in Michigan. The Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC), which oversees and delivers both probation and parole supervision statewide for individuals convicted of felonies, had just instituted women-specific caseloads. Throughout the state, agents who supervised women sentenced to probation instead of jail or prison and agents who supervised women paroled to community supervision before they completed a prison sentence received training in the special needs of women in trouble with the law and methods to meet those needs. As the only statewide shift toward gender-responsive community supervision in the nation, the reform stood out from documented county and program-level efforts to deliver gender-responsive corrections.¹ The Michigan reform grew out of MDOC staff planning and advocacy for women. Academics have paid only minimal attention to this unique reform. At the inception of the change and increasingly over time, in contrast to academics, practitioners around the country have looked to Michigan as a leader in probation and parole for women. The very large number of U.S. women on probation (718,400 in 2021) and on parole (92,700 in that same year) and the nationwide shift from mass incarceration to mass supervision warrant a close look at how the Michigan gender-responsive reforms affected women.²

The early stage of instituting women-specific probation and parole caseloads was also an exciting time to initiate research on Michigan
women supervised in the community. The MDOC was keen on obtaining input into practices that supervising agents used with women. I jumped on the opportunity to head up an interdisciplinary team of Michigan State University faculty researchers that included Sandi W. Smith (an expert on interpersonal communication in the Department of Communication), Deborah A. Kashy (an expert in social psychology and statistics in the Department of Psychology), and Jennifer E. Cobbina-Dungy (an expert on reentry from prison in the School of Criminal Justice). Funding from the National Science Foundation and the Michigan State University Foundation made it possible to study the interactions between Michigan women and their supervising agents and the outcomes of these interactions. These grants supported research on agents’ communication patterns and relationship styles with clients, how agents addressed the women’s needs, and the connection of women’s identities to desistance from illegal activity.

All study participants were substance involved, most as users and some as sellers. Because the war on drugs contributed heavily to many women’s convictions, this is the largest group of women involved in the justice system. We collected data from both supervising agents and 402 of the women they supervised in repeated interviews spread over seven years. To date, these data have informed numerous journal articles and book chapters that reveal individual-level outcomes explained by the nature of probation and parole agent communication, agents’ relationship styles, women’s goals and the barriers they face achieving them, and women’s identity change. These publications fill a gap in the literature, but the qualitative data for the 118 women presented in this book told a more complex story about the families the women grew up in, schools they attended as youths, and interactions with child-serving agencies intended to protect and treat children. The detailed qualitative data showed that as adults, key influences on women included the communities where they lived and arrays of sometimes connected but often disconnected mental health and substance abuse treatment programs, opportunities for work, and access to social safety-net benefits. These contextual and structural influences had profound effects on how supervision affected women and on women’s situations years after they started terms of probation or parole.

This book focuses on a subset of 118 of the women who started the study with at least five prior convictions. Toward the end of the series of interviews, this subset took part in an interview that elicited their life stories. Given their past histories of convictions, the women could
provide insight into the process of desistance from repeated illegal behavior, or for some of them, continuation of drug use and crime. During the entire study, which included four or five interviews plus the life story narrative, the women provided a massive amount of qualitative data in their accounts of their backgrounds, supervision, treatment, efforts to find work, applications for safety-net benefits, and steps they took to improve their lives. A compilation of these data and official records made it possible to examine the intertwined and sometimes contradictory effects of community supervision, residential context, income sources, agencies, programs, and broader policy and social structure on the women.

The women who took part in the research revealed how they faced systemic obstacles in their efforts to establish healthy and secure lives. The MDOC gender-responsive reforms positively affected individual women, but these positive effects were often diluted or even undone by employment opportunities and justice and social safety-net policies and procedures. The ways that racism reduced access to housing, employment, and community resources compounded Black women’s barriers to achieving a good life. Women took actions to improve their lives, but they often confronted two irreconcilable choices, neither of which they saw as ideal.

One participant in the research, Tina (pseudonym), made comments that reflected the contextual and structural constraints on correctional reforms and that suggested the title for this book, *In a Box*. She talked about the help that probation and parole agents could provide and the limitations on what they and their clients, including her, could do. Like many women in the study, Tina was abused as a child, and the adults in her life refused to talk about the abuse. After her foster mother abandoned her, she was on her own as an adolescent. Her first husband physically abused her. She differed from other women because her first arrest occurred at age 39, later in life than most women. Her convictions were for embezzlement, home invasion, and three instances of driving under the influence. When she told her life story, she had left her husband and was living in a house that looked to be in good repair, on one of Michigan’s many scenic lakes.

Tina summed up her experience on probation and explained what it meant to be “in a box” thus:

> I think that there are some really good people who are probation officers. And I think they are very limited, and they probably become extremely discouraged because they could probably do more to help individuals. But I think they’re put in a box, and we were put in the box, and the outcome I don’t think was very helpful then for anybody. I mean Agent Loudell [pseudonym] I will remember because he was, he was really, you could tell he cared. I think
given the opportunity to, he could of really helped some people. But number
one their caseloads were overloaded, and they didn’t have the time or the
resources to help people the way they wanted, he wanted to. . . . It wasn’t
just about me. They had limits, courts, and rules and whatever. You know
they were just as much boxed in as I was.

Reflecting on the life story interview, Tina said she had moved on
from the negative events in her past: “Sometimes some things you don’t
want to think about anymore. You just push it to the side, but it doesn’t
freak me out like it used to, ’cause it’s part of who I am. It’s part of my
story, so . . . you’ve moved on. So it’s okay.”

A CRITICAL FEMINIST FRAMEWORK
This book rests on the traditions of critical feminist theory. Consistent
with the feminist framework, the book is about women as decision
makers and self-directed actors in contexts and social locations that in-
fluenced and constrained them as they strove to do what they wanted
to do and be who they wanted to be.4 Combined with gender, other sta-
tus differentiations—social class, race, ethnicity, and disability status—
influence a person’s social location, and social location affects access to
basic services and income. Lack of access can promote lawbreaking.5
Thus, the research considered the intersections (that is, the combina-
tions) of status markers, for instance women who are White, young, with
limited education or women who are Black, young, with high school or
more education. Early Black feminist activists and scholars directed at-
tention to intersectionality as a correction to a prior failure to recognize
that race conditions the connection of being a woman and access to op-
portunities and resources.6 The women’s life stories analyzed for this
book illustrate profound differences between women who are similar
in having multiple prior criminal convictions and being on probation or
parole but differing in race.

The book is critical in its investigation of a combination of govern-
ment agencies, programs, regional market conditions for people able to
work, and available safety-net benefits for those unable to work. The aim
is to show the processes through which women were disempowered and
marginalized, or alternatively how they were empowered or empowered
themselves in ways that brought them resources and life satisfaction. The
attention that I pay to structural and contextual reasons for crime and
well-being contradicts theories that identify individual psychological and
social attributes such as mental health and antisocial friends as the sole
causes of lawbreaking. This emphasis on individual attributes informs widely accepted correctional practices that are based on social learning and behavioral theories that identify internal attributes and change as the key to reducing recidivism. Previously published findings about the women show the importance of internal change but do not show the unimportance of social location and access to resources. I ask the question, “How do women’s everyday troubles and illegal activities connect to surrounding context and structures?” My hope is that information about individuals in context and in a social location will inform programs and public policy to empower women enmeshed in the institutions and agencies broadly referred to as “corrections.”

Prior findings about the women’s identity change as revealed by analysis of the life story interview data provided the impetus for the book. According to narrative identity theory, a life story is a construction of sequential life events that explain a person’s identity at the moment the story is told. Life stories connect recollections of past events to the perceived present and imagined future to convey a coherent sense of identity and purpose, and they guide a person’s behavior. The life stories that women constructed included chapters and events within the chapters that women saw as important enough to talk about, that reflected their identities, and that they wanted to share, usually to help other women. The story gives meaning to a person’s life and explains how she or he self-identifies. Shadd Maruna’s groundbreaking research on the connection of desistance from crime to making good out of past illegal behavior inspired the use of the life story interview to understand whether making good of past negative events such as trauma, addiction, and criminal activity constituted redemption and allowed women to develop prosocial identities and behavior. People make good of negative past events by learning from them and by using their experiences to help other people. In contrast to redemption, if people see negative past events as contaminating the present, as spoiling or making bad the present, stagnation occurs. For the women I write about here, quantitative and qualitative analyses showed some connection of stagnation and contamination to continued lawbreaking, but a fairly weak connection between making good use of prior negative experiences and desistance from illegal activity. The weak connection sparked my interest in analyzing the extensive qualitative data collected in two sequential studies for the 118 women who told their life stories. I wanted to understand how context and social location facilitated or interrupted women’s shift toward seeing themselves in meaningful law-abiding roles and their actions to change their behavior to match.
METHODOLOGY

The two sequential studies of the same women used a variety of methodologies in multiple interviews with each woman. Based on prior research identifying woman-specific needs in correctional populations, Study 1 focused on gender-specific influences on lawbreaking, including abuse and trauma as children and adults, extreme poverty, mental illness, and stress from parenting. Study 1 also took quantitative measures of probation and parole agent attention to these influences, communication between agents and clients, and agents’ relationship styles. These data have been extensively analyzed for past publications, which are referenced when they are relevant to the qualitative findings presented in this book. Both Study 1 and Study 2 elicited women’s qualitative accounts of how probation and parole agents and community-based agencies responded to their self-identified needs and how human services workers responded to their efforts to obtain safety-net benefits. The research also collected information on women’s experiences in mental health and substance abuse treatment. To gather information about women’s agency—their self-directed actions—at each of five interviews, interviewers asked women what they had done recently to improve their lives. Study 2 also included the life story interview during which women identified chapters of their lives and answered follow-up questions about the meaning of key episodes in these chapters. During the life story interviews, the fifth in the interview sequence, most women described their childhoods and early relationships; how they started to use drugs and break the law; periods of increased illegal behavior and drug use; having and raising children; and their current situation, including parenting demands, drug use, and crime. The life story interviews ended with questions about challenges, plans, and the effects of telling the life story. The life stories highlighted a complex combination of contextual influences, barriers and opportunities, episodes and events, and outcomes that women included and that reflected their identities. I accepted the story elements that women presented as the important parts of their lives at the time the stories were told.

Although women’s qualitative accounts are the primary data, I supplemented them with two types of official records. Agents’ case notes supplemented women’s descriptions of probation and parole agent actions. Official state crime statistics provided information on convictions and time spent in prison before, during, and after the years when interviews were conducted.
Feminist research approaches informed the collection of qualitative data and the analysis. Consistent with feminist methods and the project staff’s promise to share women’s stories and accounts in publications and presentations, much of this book presents women’s verbatim statements.16 Treating women’s perceptions of supervising probation and parole agents, potential and actual employers, and program and agency personnel as the primary information source focused attention on not only the women who were supervised in the community but the people with power over them.17 To establish generalizability of findings, many of the endnotes link the women’s statements and stories to theory and findings from other studies. However, the text within the chapters keeps the focus on women’s accounts and interpretation of their circumstances.

Also consistent with feminist methodology, interviewer selection and training promoted a nonjudgmental, supportive attitude and communication of equality, with the study participants being experts on effects of probation and parole and on their lives, and the interviewers listening and asking questions to learn.18 The interviewers opened with statements about wanting to hear what the women had to say and the hope that this information would help to improve probation and parole. Especially for the life story interview, interviewers emphasized that women should shape the interview and share whatever they considered to be valuable information to help other women on probation and parole and to improve the supervision experience.

Women’s reflections on the life story interview indicated the nature of their relationships with the interviewers and the project. Many women expressed approval or fondness for the interview team. For example, Molly commented, “They [the researchers] got some good people on here,” and Eve said she could feel the “heart” of her prior interviewer. Women confirmed the nonjudgmental, respectful ways the interviewers treated them. Ariana said, “I know you not judging me at all. You care about my well-being.” Freya told the interviewer, “I can tell you’re compassionate, and you really listen and that means a lot.” Hope’s detailed reflection on how the life story interview unfolded and how it affected her matched other women’s sentiments:

It affected me to know that somebody’s willing to hear my story. To want to know my story, to not see me as a different person—just see me as Hope, not see me as that number and not see me as a crack head prostitute who lost their kids. . . . [Y]our facial expressions never change. You know what I’m saying? You still kept the same [look] about you. You were never like . . .
lost their kids! . . . [Y]ou asked for the [chapter] titles of the book and you wanted to—you were interested, you really wanted to know really what was those chapters’ meaning. You know, it wasn’t like, “Okay, you finished now? Okay, I’ve got to go to the next question, I’m trying to get out of here you know?” You showed that you was really interested. So, and that helps me, you know, that helps a lot because people say they want to hear what you got to say, but soon as you get to talking and it’s something uncomfortable, “Girl I just got this text [phone message]. I will get with you.”

The effects and meanings that women associated with taking part in the research provided assurance of the trustworthiness of findings. Asked about the effect of telling her life story, Gabriela said, “I’ve shared my story probably more than the average person ever will in their life. . . . If what I am telling somebody can help them, then that’s all that matters. They might remember something I said 10 years from now and it finally clicks and makes sense in their heads.” Fiona expressed similar feelings, noting why she was telling her story: “Whatever I can do to try to help somebody else not feel the way that I fucking feel, so be it.” Women’s motivation for sharing their life stories and the meaningfulness they attached to doing so rested in part on the relationship with the interviewer and prior interviewers who worked on the research, as well as on women’s perceptions of the larger project.

Of course, not every life storyteller told detailed life stories. Heidi shared the least amount of information in the interviews. She indicated that she had been arrested on an old warrant for a crime she did not commit, and she skipped or answered “don’t know” to most questions. She summed up her thoughts and feelings about the life story interview: “It was okay. I don’t have any more comments.” Heidi’s response to the interview was an anomaly, since most (94 of 118) women explicitly identified a benefit to themselves or help to another person as actual or possible interview outcomes, and those who did not usually said there was no effect of the interview or there was no negative effect.

Because justice-involved women have unique needs, over multiple interviews open-ended questions about topics discussed with probation and parole agents were based on a needs assessment tool, the Women’s Risk/Needs Assessment (WRNA), developed from feminist theory and research on women’s pathways to illegal behavior. Also consistent with feminist theory that highlights intersectionality, the analysis informing this book examined racial, age, and residential community differences. Reflecting Michigan demographics, nearly all women identified as White, Black, both White and Black, or a mix of one of these racial
identities and Hispanic ethnicity. At the start of the research, women ranged from 19 to 56 years old, and they were about equally distributed in the age categories 30 and under, 31 to 40, and 41 and older. They lived in a variety of communities that included rural areas, small towns, prosperous suburbs, distressed cities, and prosperous suburbs. Only a few identified as trans or nonbinary. The variations among the women made it possible to examine differences and similarities between Black and White women and women from different types of communities and to determine whether findings held across women varying in life stage.

The remainder of this chapter places women in three contextual and structural locations that affected what gender-responsive correctional reforms accomplished and the degree to which women could control their lives. First, to place the women in neighborhoods and communities, I report on a virtual tour of the block or the rural areas where they lived when they told their life stories. As shown in later chapters, this tour and women’s descriptions of how they avoided crime and victimization in their places of residence highlight racial differences and related urban/suburban/rural differences in women’s exposure to crime, opportunities for both legal and illegal work, and access to resources. Second, I describe economic conditions in Michigan and national and state neoliberal policies based on the belief that individuals could and should pull themselves out of poverty, drug use, and criminal activity. These policies heavily affected the women on probation and parole by magnifying differences due to poverty. Race, community location, and financial well-being created intersections of social location that also affected the women. Third, consistent with the focus on probation and parole supervision, this introductory chapter ends with a description of supervision practices in Michigan at the time of the research. This description explains how courts influence supervision and the statewide role of the MDOC field services division in handling probation and parole for individuals convicted of a felony. It includes detail about early stages of MDOC’s transition to an emphasis on responding to the unique backgrounds and needs of women.

**RESIDENTIAL CONTEXT**

Interviewers recruited women into the study from the caseloads of probation and parole agents in 16 of the 84 Michigan counties located within two hours’ or shorter drive from the research office. The counties included 68 percent of the state’s population in 2011 and all major
metropolitan areas in the state. The sampling strategy enabled research staff to access women from large and small cities, small towns, and rural areas; however, it had the downside of decontextualizing women from the varied places where they lived and obscuring their opportunities (or lack thereof) to relocate. Women interviewed for this book lived in high-crime, racially segregated urban neighborhoods, better resourced and safer urban neighborhoods, high-poverty suburbs at the edge of Detroit and Grand Rapids (the two highest population cities in the state), well-to-do city suburbs, small towns, and rural communities. The criminological literature recognizes residential location as important in crime causation, and the broader sociological literature highlights residential location as a key to access to resources. To imagine women in their residences, neighborhoods, and communities, I not only drew on women’s descriptions of the places they lived in response to questions about how they avoided crime and victimization in their communities. I also used online resources such as Zillow.com, Realtor.com, and earth.google.com, as well as online resident reviews of apartment complexes and mobile home communities, to picture where they lived. These resources enabled me to look at each woman’s residence and take a tour of the block (or for rural areas, nearby structures and land) where women lived when they told their life stories.

A large proportion of the Black women lived in poorly resourced, high-crime sections of Detroit and its outskirts, or in smaller postindustrial, economically distressed Michigan cities such as Flint, Saginaw, and Pontiac, where manufacturing jobs had declined and high income inequality prevailed. Of the 42 women who identified as Black and neither Hispanic nor multiracial, 93 percent (39) lived in these urban areas, and 2 of the remaining 3 Black women lived in Grand Rapids, the second largest city in Michigan. Grand Rapids did not suffer as much as other Michigan cities during the recession that started in 2008, but the city contained pockets of concentrated poverty. My observations from the virtual tour generated examples of the distressed areas surrounding residences of urban Black women who took part in the research:

Jill, 32, just over the Detroit boundary. This house and neighborhood show signs of deterioration and disorder. There are vacant lots, two boarded up houses with overgrown trees a few doors down, and a burned-out house four doors down.

Francesca, 35, Black and White, lived in an apartment outside a relatively large Michigan city where she had worked since adolescence as a street prostitute. The reviews of the apartment mention the smell of