Study identifies tech challenges of women transitioning from incarceration

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Marginalized communities have been hit especially hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, and for women transitioning back to society after

incarceration, it has severely affected their access to and knowledge about technology, one of the keys to making the transition. University of Kansas scholars have written a study about the return to a digital world for women coming out of prison or jail, their technology use, privacy management and the effects of the pandemic on their digital access. The research was part of building technology classes to help the population successfully rejoin society.

Hyunjin Seo, associate professor of journalism and mass communications at KU, is principal investigator of a grant from the National Science Foundation in 2019 to provide evidence-based technology education to women transitioning from incarceration. Through interviews with 75 women, they learned more about challenges these women face in returning to an increasingly digital world. Specifically, they found the women, though showing varying degrees of experiences with digital technologies, often have inadequate access to the internet, rely on cellphones for completing tasks online and often know little about protecting their privacy online, or have potentially dangerous attitudes about online safety. On top of that, the pandemic has presented further challenges in internet access and gaining employment upon reentering society.

The findings are presented in an article forthcoming in the journal *New Media and Society*. Co-authors include Hannah Britton, professor of political science and of women, gender and sexuality studies; Megha Ramaswamy, associate professor of preventive medicine and public health; doctoral students Darcey Altschwager, Matt Blomberg and Shola Aromona; and senior researchers Bernard Schuster, Marilyn Ault and Joi Wickliffe, all of KU. The research results have also served as foundation for an evidence-based technology class for women transitioning from incarceration. Seo had previously designed a local educational program for the population and was encouraged by all of the participants successfully finding employment.

"I'd been thinking about how to scale up that project, so we submitted a research proposal to the National Science Foundation to work with more women in Missouri and Kansas," Seo said. "Happily, this proposal was funded. For all of our projects like this, we first conduct rigorous research to develop an evidence-based program."

The article presents findings on the challenges and knowledge women transitioning from incarceration had, both before and during the pandemic. Key among the findings was access to the internet. Many women reported relying on cellphones to access the internet. Often, they also used places like public libraries, coffee shops or fast food restaurants for Wi-Fi. The pandemic further complicated matters.

"There is increasing awareness of a digital divide and its effects, especially during a pandemic. A significant proportion of people simply do not have adequate access to computers or internet at home. Public places where they generally use public-access computers or Wi-Fi are closed due to COVID-19," Seo said. "Women transitioning from incarceration have distinct challenges as well. While incarcerated, they are separated from technology and have to catch up when released."

Fewer than half of respondents reported having a laptop or standalone computer they could use. Some reported having to borrow laptops or tablets provided by schools when the students weren't using them to accomplish tasks such as completing job applications and searching for housing. Those who had cellphones with internet access often had data plans that severely limited the amount of time they could spend online each month.

Isolation from digital technologies while incarcerated was often compounded by other factors when participants were learning about new technologies upon release.

"A significant percentage of women who were incarcerated had histories of sexual harassment or abuse, which can lead to mental health challenges, increased frustration, anger management and other issues when trying to learn about new technology," Seo said.

In terms of online security and privacy, the research participants indicated they often did not know how to protect their privacy or information online. That manifested in several ways, including many choosing not to join social media or going online very little for fear of losing information. Several women, especially those recently released, also reported feelings of still being monitored or surveilled, which resulted in reluctance to be active online. Others reported not wanting to be online in order to avoid being located by abusive partners or exes, or a reluctance to make friends on social media for that reason.

A lack of knowledge about online security also revealed itself in a "nothing-to-lose" attitude among some of the women in the study. Respondents frequently reported having bad credit, lack of employment or little money as reasons to not be fearful of having their information exposed online. Such an attitude is dangerous, as it can lead to reckless behavior or leave people vulnerable to malicious actors online, Seo said.

Above all, the findings show a digital divide is real, and certain populations are often left behind in terms of digital access and knowledge. The overall project aims to support more than 100 women-in-reentry to complete technology education during the three-year project period. Participants not only learn about technology, security and privacy and receive certificates of completion they can list on their resumes, and skills they can put to work in successfully rejoining society and avoiding recidivism.

"We're trying to help this population of women enhance their technological skills that they can use in securing employment in an

environment where their skills are increasingly valued," Seo said. "We also know the pandemic has forced the cancelation of many classes and made access more difficult. Google Fiber has provided support for purchasing refurbished computers and mobile hotspots for the project. There have been efforts made to address the digital divide, but there simply have not been sufficient efforts made on behalf of this particular group."

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