



Voices of remanded women in Western Canada: A qualitative analysis

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ABSTRACT

Comparatively little is known about how Canadian prisoners experience and make sense of their lives inside Canadian correctional facilities. Based on 39 qualitative in-depth interviews conducted with remanded women in a Western Canadian remand prison as part of the University of Alberta Prison Project (UAPP), this article serves to describe the five main issues that women in our sample highlighted about their incarceration and how those were shaped by their own backgrounds and life histories: 1) Victimization; 2) Distrust of the police, 3) Parenting while incarcerated; 4) Addictions and mental health; 5) Contextual benefits of prison. The implications of this work for criminal justice practitioners, policymakers, and scholars are discussed. Our findings serve to detail the commonalities between the women in an effort to provide criminal justice and social service actors with contextual background information about their clients. They show that the women lack access to the myriad social and institutional supports that so many people take for granted, including protection from physical and sexual abuse, access to stable housing, addiction support, medical and dental treatment, mental health supports, trauma counselling, and the like.

Key Words Prisons; corrections; victimization; victim-offender overlap; female prisoners; police; addictions; remand

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INTRODUCTION

Research on prison and incarcerated populations is a core sociological topic. Going back to Sykes' classic *Society of Captives* (1958) and Jacobs's subsequent *Stateville* (1977), prison research in the United States was once prominently ethnographic and in-depth. Through these classic works, generations of scholars and students garnered insights into the prison code, the dynamics between officers and prisoners, gangs in prison, and the lived reality of prison. Due to issues relating to access, funding cuts, and shifting methodological trends in sociology and criminology (Eason, 2017; Crewe, 2006), prison research after Jacobs's *Stateville* became more and more a view from afar, as researchers started conducting a higher percentage of research on prisons and incarcerated populations without necessarily entering prisons or talking to incarcerated people. In recent years, both in Europe and the United States, the tide appears to be turning, as we have seen a resurgence of researchers conducting research within the prison's walls (for example, McCorkel, 2013; Wacquant 2002; Crewe 2013).

In comparison with Europe and the United States, however, there has been little independent prison-based research in Canada. Traditionally, Canadian correctional ministries have been comparatively closed off to outsiders (Watson & van der Meulen, 2019; Pelvin, 2019), allowing for few independent research opportunities. Consequently, Canadians mostly rely on research that has been conducted either internally by correctional ministries or in close collaboration with correctional ministries, but in contrast to Europe and the United States, we have few independent examinations of how Canadian prisoners experience and make sense of their lives inside of Canadian correctional facilities. This is especially true for women (but see Comack, 1996).

In this article, we provide an overview of the main issues 39 remanded women in a prison in Western Canada highlighted about their experiences in a remand prison and how those were shaped by their own backgrounds and life histories. The article thus serves as a precursor to future works in which we will examine each of the highlighted themes in greater detail. Our purpose here is to raise initial awareness about the major issues these women indicated they faced

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while remanded in Canada and the main factors that shape their life experiences more generally. In this sense, we hope the article will be particularly useful for criminal justice and social service stakeholders interested in an overview of the circumstances that have shaped the lives of their potential clients. Given that women continue to be underrepresented in criminological research (Smart, 2013), this article also contributes more generally to our evolving understanding of female prisoners. We have chosen to present these insights by relying heavily on the words of the women we interviewed, given that members of this population rarely get to directly express their views and experiences.

METHODS

This article is based on semi-structured qualitative interviews with 39 incarcerated women in a remand facility in Western Canada. The interviews were conducted as part of the University of Alberta Prison Project (UAPP) involving a much larger data set that includes a total of 587 interviews with incarcerated men and women across four prisons in a Western Canadian province. In addition to conducting qualitative interviews, we also collected demographic survey data and survey data about victimization. The larger data set also consists of qualitative interviews with 131 correctional officers. Given that the prisoner population in Canada is predominately male, the great majority of the larger data set consists of interviews with men. For the purposes of this article, we are concentrating on interviews with remanded female prisoners only. As research inside of prisons is almost non-existent in Canada due to the closed and risk-averse nature of correctional ministries, our study comprises the largest independent qualitative study on Canadian prisons in the history of Canadian criminology.

We received Ministry and research ethics approval from the University of Alberta for our study in 2016 and conducted the interviews used for this article in a four-week period in 2017. The interviews took place in a remand institution that housed 700 prisoners in total, about 80 of whom were women. Remand facilities differ from conventional prisons in that they house all adults awaiting trial, a group encompassing a range of individuals, from those arrested for impaired driving all the way to those accused of multiple murders or terrorism-related activities. People housed in remand tend to be housed there for a comparatively short time while awaiting their sentences (a few days, weeks, or months) compared with those in the federal system, where convicted prisoners might be serving sentences of many years (Reitano, 2017).

We entered the prison as a group of eight researchers (the two principal investigators and six research assistants). We made public announcements on the prison living units, explaining that we were conducting research on life experiences in provincial prisons, and asked for volunteers who might be interested in participating. Typically, one researcher conducted the interviews on one living unit, allowing us to disperse the team across different units and reach a broad cross-section of prisoners. At this particular prison, there were two living units housing female prisoners, the vast majority of whom were eager to participate.

We conducted one-on-one interviews in private rooms within the prison, usually on the living units. We guaranteed

participants' confidentiality and anonymity and, with their permission, digitally recorded the interviews. We employed a generalized interview guide which asked a series of wide-ranging questions about prison life, gangs, group membership, victimization, and radical activity, among other topics. As is common in qualitative studies, we also gave our participants license to let their experiences shape the direction of the interviews, allowing their unique perspectives to come to the fore (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This provided us with a rich body of contextual data, which we further enriched through participant observation in each prison. Seeing us around the prison and understanding that we had no connection with the correctional ministry, yet were deeply interested in the life stories of the women and in highlighting their voices, the women soon saw us as what Bucerius labels "trusted outsiders" in the prison (Bucerius, 2013). Our research team was diverse in socio-economic background, race, ethnic background, gender, and sexual orientation, allowing us to overcome the potential limitations and interview biases associated with having just one interviewer. Our participants were not compensated for participating in the interviews because the correctional ministry did not allow for compensation. However, for both male and female prisoners and across all prisons that are part of the UAPP, we experienced widespread willingness to participate and were unable to accommodate everyone.

To ensure analytical rigor, we drew on principles and heuristic devices of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) when coding and analyzing our data set. During our coding phase, most themes and categories related to women's experiences emerged through answers and discussions around questions and prompts associated with the women's life experiences and their life inside the remand. Data collection and analysis were ongoing and intertwined, and we used a constant comparative method, where we compared our initial themes and codes with new emergent themes, adjusted interview protocols, identified patterns and gaps in our initial coding scheme, and developed new conceptual categories.

We used basic tabular data to identify similarities and differences in the data and to verify the overall strength of patterns in the data. This method also helped us to identify cases that deviated from our observed patterns. After we completed all of our interviews, five researchers coded a set of six randomly chosen interviews to determine whether our coding scheme to date had to be amended by adding categories. Once we reached between 85% and 90% overlap (i.e., intercoder reliability) on the six randomly chosen transcripts, we thematically coded the transcripts using the qualitative software tool Nvivo 11. Interviews with prisoners varied in length but averaged approximately 90 minutes.

RESULTS

This article provides a preliminary overview of the most pertinent themes that arose during our interviews. In future publications, we anticipate addressing each of the themes we are highlighting here in greater depth and with more nuance. The themes are: 1) Victimization, 2) Distrust of the police, 3) Parenting while incarcerated, 4) Addictions and mental health, and 5) Contextual benefits of prison. We address each of these in turn.

Victimization

A theme woven through many of the interviews concerned victimization. The fact that offenders might also have a history of personal victimization has become a central tenet of criminological research (Bottoms & Costello, 2010). Often referred to as the “victim/offender overlap,” this phenomenon has been explored with different data sets in recent years (Agnew 2002; Broidy, Daday, Crandall, Sklar, & Jost, 2006; Jennings, Higgins, Tewksbury, Gover, & Piquero, 2010; Jennings, Piquero, & Reingle, 2012; Ouesy, Wilcox, & Fisher, 2011; Piquero, MacDonald, Dobrin, Daigle, & Cullen, 2005; Sampson & Lauristen 1990; Silver, Piquero, Jennings, Piquero, & Leiber, 2011). Many of these studies have focused on the statistical regularities in the victim/offender overlap and, in our study, the survey data showed that 74% of our sample reported histories of sexual abuse during their life course. Most of these individuals reported several or multiple victimization incidents; 81% of the women in our sample reported violent victimization at some point over their life course, again with many reporting multiple instances of violent victimization. The majority of women experienced some form of victimization (property, violent, sexual) before committing their first offense.

One key development frequently missing from such works, however, is the voices of the affected population, which can provide humanizing insights into dry statistical accounts that are often too easy to gloss over. Having a qualitative component to our study allowed us to gather more personal insights into these women’s victimization histories. While such accounts can be unsettling to read, it is important that they be presented in order to accentuate the human realities of this pervasive pattern of personal victimization. Maria, for example, recounted the following details of her victimization history:

In school I was more, uh, I was not listening and learning. I was more of “Oh my god, where am I gonna go after school, so I don’t have to go home to get beat?” and stuff. That’s the kind of stuff I had to worry about when I was a kid. So, I didn’t pay attention in school. And at age eleven I was kicked out, beat up, and kicked out from my mom. Cuz’ I was molested from my dad and she’s drunk and she hit me in the head a couple times with a two-by-four and she whipped me with a hanger and called me a slut and told me I deserved what happened to me.

Natasha, another participant, described an unsettling pattern of sexual assault that comprised some of her earliest memories:

From age three to seventeen, I got molested from a [male] family member. And, I started getting raped when I was six. And then I told my foster parent. I got the lickin’ of my life and grounded for, like [pause] forever. I just, tried to get away but it just got ten times worse when I was ten. ... I used to get raped by other people that would come to our house. And

then by the time I was sixteen, I was sold ... into sexual relationships with other people.

One intriguing aspect of how women recounted their obviously shocking victimization histories is that they did not present them as excuses for their criminal behaviour. Rather, they were typically conveyed as matter-of-fact recollections of their traumatic life experiences, much in the same way one might recount a traffic accident. The fact that the interviewees regularly displayed such emotional detachment from what were often horrific experiences of abuse often made these stories even more difficult for some of the interviewers to process than if they had been presented in a style that was more stereotypically distressed.

Similarly to the two women above, Lucy describes multiple sexual victimizations over her life course, starting at the age of five:

Lucy: Um yeah. I was probably like five. I guess, um, my step dad’s family. And the first time it happened in a church actually. Being in the sex trade, I’ve had lots of customers, pimps.

Interviewer: Before you were first charged, how often were sexual crimes committed against you?

Lucy: A few times a week for so many years, and then it stopped obviously and then, after, actually it’s been going on for a long time.

Interviewer: After you were first charged how often did these things happen?

Lucy: Same.

Interviewer: It’s consistent victimization?

Lucy: Yeah, yeah. Girls who are escorts we get all sorts of shit like that. And it’s just kind of part of it. And the pimps they don’t really protect us that much. No, they basically... I have a pimp because I don’t have, can’t get a hotel room on my own. I know I’m always taken care of as in to always have drugs and a place to rest my head at night.

Here, Lucy seems to conflate her childhood victimization with her repeated and ongoing adult sexual victimization. And she acknowledges that her pimp provides her with minimal protection; he offers some of the bare necessities of life, in terms of providing a place to sleep.

Julianna, in reflecting on her life on the reserve, speaks of how she moved from one victimization circumstance to another:

When I was with my mom, she always abused me, she always hurt me and um like she always beat me up. And then after I ran away, and then I was at this other house, and you know, I got abused there so much I don’t remember it because you know, I was given pills and drinking you know. Yeah I was at this one house, I was abused and taken advantage

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

of but I don't remember anything. I just remember I just woke up in my ex's room, yeah.

Again, the matter-of-fact tone of Julianna's account of her abuse creates the illusion of normality in what is actually a startling level of abuse: forms of victimization that ranged from theft of property to sexual violence and multiple reports of repeat victimization.

As stated above, the majority of women in our sample experienced their first victimization prior to committing their first criminal offence. Maria, Lucy, Natasha, and Julianna all exemplify this situation, recounting significant forms of trauma that occurred in childhood and would be classified as adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Beyond the trauma of experiencing such events, these forms of victimization have also been shown to alter a person's brain chemistry in such a way as to make them more susceptible to illnesses such as diabetes and cancer, while also contributing to an inability to properly cope with stressors, something that can increase the likelihood that such individuals will be incarcerated and unemployed (Baglivio *et al.*, 2014; Fox, Perez, Cass, Baglivio, & Epps, 2015; Rossegger *et al.*, 2009).

Distrust of the police

While the vast majority of women in our sample had experienced physical or sexual victimization, reporting such victimization experiences to the police was extremely rare. Many factors contributed to this reluctance to contact the authorities, including a belief that the police could or would do little to resolve their problems. Prior experiences with the police where criminal justice interventions proved to be ineffectual or even counter-productive played a role in these assessments. Lucy, for example, describes an instance where the police became involved with her abusive boyfriend, but the outcome of having tried to resolve this issue through the criminal justice system seemed pointless or absurd:

when my boyfriend split my head open and everything. He went to jail. He was only in jail for a week and that was it. Like, I did more time for fucking trafficking drugs than he did for actually really hurting me. So. Yeah. And I wasn't even the one that charged him; the cops charged him so, yeah.

Lucy, who had experienced multiple forms of victimization—including a history of sexual violence that dated back to when she was five—also highlighted the common belief expressed by the women that the police routinely discount the concerns of people who have marginalized personal background and life experiences. This can deter them from calling the police:

Cuz I don't think that they [the police] will listen to me anyways and I don't think anything would get done about it. And I just don't think it matters because I'm a girl addicted to drugs doing sex crimes. So, I just don't think it will matter.

For those who were heavily involved in a criminal lifestyle, talking to the police was anathema, going against the well-established norms against "ratting" (Natapoff, 2009).

Several women also described instances where they had been assaulted by the police, a situation which clearly undermines police legitimacy and precluded any prospect that the women would turn to the police for assistance. For example, in recounting her violent victimization experiences, Anna stated: "I've experienced it with a cop. Like when I came in this last time, the cops broke my collarbone and fractured by orbital bone when they arrested me."

Parenting while incarcerated

Another key theme raised by our participants related to parenting. As researchers in other contexts have pointed out, there are tremendous collateral negative effects on the family members of those who are incarcerated (see, for example, Comfort, 2007), particularly their children (Scharff-Smith, 2014; Wakefield & Wildeman, 2014). In keeping with the findings of previous research (Crewe, Hulley, & Wright, 2017), the women in our sample uniformly told us that missing their children is one of the hardest (often *the* hardest) aspects of being incarcerated. While some maintained contact with their children throughout their prison stay, others did not stay connected. For almost all women, however, their children represented the strongest motivation for personal change. A desire to "get better," to address their patterns of substance misuse, and move out of a criminal lifestyle for the benefit of their children was a consistent message in nearly all of our interviews.

Particularly demoralizing for incarcerated mothers was that they often felt they were judged by correctional officers and staff, who subtly or sometimes explicitly reminded them that they might not deserve to be parents or have access to their children. Anna, for example, refers to an incident from one of her previous periods of incarceration:

I had my daughter when I was in the pen [federal prison], my youngest daughter. I gave birth to her while I was serving a pen, a federal sentence. So I had to leave her at the hospital and then she'd come into the pen and visit me. And I brought back a program called the "mother child program." But I had guards come up to me and tell me that they didn't think that I deserved to have my child in there. And I looked at the guard and I said, "You know what? You're probably right. I don't deserve to have my child, but what makes you think she doesn't deserve to have me?"

While the mothers in our sample all suffer from not seeing their children, the children of the incarcerated women are themselves the collateral victims of the correctional system (Scharff-Smith, 2014). While some children may find themselves in a more safe or stable environment by virtue of being physically separated from their biological mothers, having an incarcerated parent has also been identified as an "adverse childhood experience," associated with unfavourable outcomes later in life (Murray, Farrington, & Sekol, 2012; Arditti, 2012). In discussing her efforts to maintain contact with her child, Josee identifies some of these challenges:

I call my mother. She [pause] uh [pause], she's special, let's just say. That's, that's one relationship that I uh, haven't been able to completely fix, right. Because of my past three years of being in jail, right.

She just, she's sour about it and I don't blame her. But I'm grateful and I'm thankful for her taking my son the past few years, right. So, um, it sucks and whatever but I still, I go out there and I go see him. I still have a relationship with my son. She doesn't deny me that type of access. She does uh, when I get in jail, when I go to jail, she does try and make it difficult because he's, he's to the age where he's gonna start to remember "where is she?" Which sucks, I understand.

Interviewer: Is that the hardest thing in here, not being able to see him?

Josee: When I go to jail, yeah. Because I don't, sometimes I don't really call when I'm in jail. Because I don't like to put my mother in that situation and I don't want to, it's just not personal enough, right. Because he, when I try calling in space/time right? So, you can see me, so to call on the phone is just, like, "why can't I see you?" Those are questions where it's hard for me to try and answer. And I don't want to lie to him, I don't want to lie to my son. I don't want to, I don't ever want to lie to him. When he's at an age where he can understand, where I can sit and explain to him, like that's different. I'll never keep a secret from my son, ever. His father, I will tell him fuck all though.

The situation Josee describes here is obviously painful for her, but she is also attuned to the adverse and perhaps traumatic outcomes it can have on her son, who cannot see his mother and has difficulty making sense of this situation and periods of non-contact (Murray & Farrington, 2005). Naomi raises similar issues relating to accessing her children:

Yeah, that's too, like they don't have visits and stuff. If there are visits, they're just through the TV. screens that they have here. Yeah, and if they're in child welfare, they don't bring your kids here at all. That's something that I'm dealing with, cuz my kids are in child welfare, right? And they don't, I haven't seen my kids in almost a year. And now that I'm in jail, they look at you and they judge you. You know, just because they're dealing with some things that, you know, you didn't mean to do, or something that you didn't even do but you're just in here because of it. They judge you for that, and that's something that shouldn't happen. I don't think that's right for people to judge.

As Naomi points out, the child welfare system often becomes involved with the families of incarcerated women. The women in our sample often spoke of their children being placed in the care of family members, or, more consequentially, being taken from them and placed in foster care. Such removals were part of the traumatic shared victimization history of many women, as Lisa describes here:

Yeah, most of us have kids. I try not, me personally, I try not to talk about kids because most of these

women have their kids taken from them, right. Because like, being a mother, it's hard. It's hard to give away your kids, right. Nobody wants to give away their kids. Me, I'd rather give my son before I have the chance to neglect him any further. Cuz' my kids deserve the best and I'm not.

As Lisa states, many women in our sample had come to the harsh realization that they were not the best parenting option for their children, an insight that certainly compounded their guilt and stress relating to their parenting situation. At the same time, however, this did not detract from the role their children played in motivating them to live a life outside of the confines of the prison, crime, and addictions.

Addictions and mental health

Previous research has shown that there is often a connection between drugs and crime, something that is true for both men and women (Caulkins & Kleiman, 2014). A large body of research has demonstrated that substance misuse and mental health often go hand in hand in co-occurring disorders (Kessler et al., 1996; McNeil, Binder, & Robinson, 2005; RachBeisel, Scott, & Dixon, 1999), with prisons disproportionately housing people who fit this profile. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, many of the women in our sample emphasized how their addictions had affected their mental health and lives more generally, including having contributed to their criminal activities, incarceration, and, in many cases, the loss of their children.

We asked the women to estimate how many of the people on their unit struggled with addictions and substance misuse. Their answers typically ranged between 90% and 100%, with Rachel's answer here being representative of what we heard constantly from the larger sample:

Rachel: I would probably say 99% of us have addiction issues. There's probably one maybe who doesn't. You know what I mean. But that's rare. Because a lot of us do have addiction issues. It's like whether it's alcohol, whether it's stealing, whether it's just drugs or lying, you know what I mean. It could be several things.

Interviewer: Right. I guess I was thinking about more classical ones, the alcohol and the drugs. Is that still kind of dominant?

Rachel: Yeah it's more drugs though, now. Right, because now that crystal meth has become huge. Like, like everybody wants Prada shoes? Well everybody wants crystal meth, you know.

This theme of substance misuse was remarkably consistent, with Cora providing a particularly compelling description of the subjective experience of struggling with her addictions:

It's like, it's like a constant battle in your head. Like, like you're constantly battling yourself because [pause] and it's lonely. It's like super, it's super lonely. You have a hole inside of you, it's the best way I can

describe it. And you're constantly trying to fill that hole with something. And usually when you're in active addiction, that hole is still there and you're still trying to fill it with something. But the hole's gettin' bigger an' bigger an' bigger. And then when you sober up, that hole is still there. But then, you're struggling to find ways to fill it, and the hole's not getting bigger but still staying the same. So, it is a little bit better in sobriety but the hole's still there. It's like, once you take it too far, there's never turning back.

Given that the great majority of women in our sample reported having addiction and mental health issues, it was disconcerting how frequently they observed that the prison system provides them with few resources to address these issues. This insight, however, is in keeping with the recognized fact that the remand system is characterized by a general lack of programming. This includes services designed to address deeper traumas pertaining to the multitude of factors incarcerated women are dealing with, including victimization, the loss of their children, addictions, and mental health situations. What little programming existed was portrayed by the women as being cursory and infrequently available. Naomi provides a sense of this in her description of the quality of mental health services in remand:

Interviewer: Yeah, what, what happens if someone um, really needs help? Let's just say you're, someone's suicidal, like can you, can you?

Naomi: Then they get put into the FMH [Female Mental Health] unit and get watched behind glass.

Interviewer: So, there's no help, you don't get to talk to someone, or?

Naomi: No, well they got a, um a [pause] what the hell is it? It's like a person that works with mental health, that's, they just call themselves mental health: "I work for mental health, and I'm just wondering how you're doing." They'll come by, and they'll ask you once a week.

The prison system in which these women are housed seems to be defined by twin historical trends that: on the one hand, deinstitutionalized people with mental health needs (Scull, 1984) while, on the other hand, over-criminalization of that same population (Freudenberg, 2002; Navasky, 2005). This is particularly concerning for Indigenous women, as they make up the largest growing group of incarcerated in the world (Kilroy & Pate, 2011).

Contextual benefits of prison

Prisons are frequently (and justifiably) portrayed as harrowing institutions, spaces that produce and exacerbate numerous physical, social, and psychological harms for incarcerated men and women. In the context of this received wisdom, one of the most unexpected findings of this project was how frequently the women participants suggested that they found prison desirable because it provided them with a number of pragmatic benefits. Upon reflection, this should not have been surprising,

The extent to which prison—or any institution—might be seen as appealing is contextual—and informed by an assessment of the viable alternatives. Most women in our sample lived precarious lives that were overdetermined by abuse, addiction, homelessness, and other forms of marginalization. It was these harsh realities of their lives outside of prison that dictated their consistent pattern of portraying prison as a temporary refuge (see also Frois, 2017). Our participants drew attention to many reasons why they saw prison as beneficial when compared with the realistic alternatives, and here we highlight three that were repeatedly mentioned: 1) Housing, 2) Personal victimization, 3) Substance misuse.

Many of the women in remand were precariously housed prior to being incarcerated. This might involve living rough on the street, squatting in abandoned houses, camping out in the local river valley, or "couch surfing" on any accommodations friends or acquaintances might make available to them. The constant stress of this situation, along with the attendant physical risks of homelessness, was frequently mentioned as helping to make prison a desirable alternative. As Victoria put it, "Before I got arrested this last time I... wanted to come back to jail because I didn't have a house. I didn't have a shelter. I didn't know when I was going to eat. I didn't know where I was going to shower."

Many of the women described continuously facing the prospect of being victimized outside of prison by a long list of people in their respective circles, including family members, friends, strangers, clients, and pimps. It was this routine pattern of victimization—often involving physical and sexual assault—that again helped to make prison appear a desirable alternative. Mary, for example, drew attention to the fact that she could somewhat relax and be less vigilant in prison against the constant prospect of being raped that she faced while living on the street:

It's hard out there sometimes, right, cuz you're hungry, or you're wondering like, how can you stay up [awake] for the night. Like sometimes we have to do the meth or pint [methamphetamines] to stay up to go out there. For the girls it's hard. You have to do the drugs to stay up, cuz you can't fall asleep on the streets, you'll get raped, you know what I mean. The guys would take advantage of you or something.

Others saw benefits to being incarcerated as it forced them to confront their addictions, or at a minimum allowed them to temporarily "dry out." While there was little substance abuse programming in remand that they might take advantage of, they often portrayed the fact of being incarcerated as a "wake-up call," providing the stimulus to reflect upon their substance abuse and perhaps take steps to get clean. This concern was particularly acute at the time of our research given that the local drug scene had seen an influx of highly lethal synthetic opioids, such as fentanyl and carfentanyl (Bucerius & Haggerty, 2019), which was contributing to a rash of overdoses. In this context, many women suggested that being arrested broke a pattern of drug use that would likely have proved to be lethal. Vickie gives a sense of this situation:

Yeah, I think jail is like a rehab, I think it's like a blessing in disguise honestly. A lot of people look

at it like “oh my God, like it’s the worse place.” But I feel like coming to jail like is a blessing honestly.

This theme was reiterated by many others, including Lucy, who observed,

I would say there was a huge benefit because I was so messed up with my mom passing away, I didn’t feel like I had anything to live for. I’ve done more drugs in one day than I was ever doing before. I was doing more crime, more anything, and like I overdosed four times in one week and so I really think that if I didn’t come to jail when I did then I probably would’ve overdosed and died. I find that that’s good.

Amy reiterated this theme, noting,

I lost who I was. And so being in here like, I don’t know [pause] jail kind of saved me, because if I wasn’t in jail right now, I would probably still be getting high and still be in that abusive relationship. Like I’m actually kind of, kind of glad I’m now in here right now.

Dissecting these accounts of the benefits of prison makes it clear that incarceration becomes desirable to these women in a context where there is an absence of much-needed programming. As such, this is not a “good news” story about the desirability of prison, but rather a tragic account of the failure of social services on the outside to provide marginalized women with basic necessities relating to security, housing, and social welfare. We also suspect that this orientation to prison is a function of the fact that most women in remand are housed there for a comparatively short time. This comparative brevity might be what allows them to conceive of prison as a type of brief “time out” from the lives of precarity and vulnerability that they live on the street.

DISCUSSION

The dominant theme that emerged from the interviews with our sample of remanded women was that of victimization, which is in line with much of the existing research in other national contexts (Agnew, 2002; Broidy et al., 2006; Jennings et al., 2010, 2012; Ousey et al., 2011; Piquero et al., 2005; Sampson & Lauritsen, 1990; Silver et al., 2011). The women we spoke with report a consistent pattern of victimization, much of which occurred before the onset of their own offending behaviour. Indeed, being victimized seems to be one of the most defining shared characteristic of the otherwise diverse prisoner population. At the same time, our qualitative interviews demonstrated a reticence to report instances of criminal victimization to police, suggesting that the majority of victimizations that prisoners experience will never be captured in official records (Bottoms & Costello, 2010; Cuevas, Finkelhor, Turner, & Ormrod, 2007; Daigle, Beaver, & Hartman 2008; Osgood, Wilson, O’Malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 1996; Pyrooz, Moule, & Decker, 2014; Shaffer, 2003; Smith & Ecob, 2007; Sullivan, Ousey, & Wilcox, 2016).

The majority of our participants were victimized during their childhood. This is particularly important to appreciate, as prior research has shown that experiencing trauma as a child, such as physical or sexual victimization, can be a contributing factor to future offending (Cuevas et al., 2007; Falshaw, Browne, & Hollin, 1996; Stewart, Livingston, & Dennison, 2008; Widom & Morris, 1997). In recent years, criminologists have suggested that adverse childhood experiences play a prominent role in leading people down the road to criminality (DeLisi et al., 2017). These comprise many of the forms of trauma identified by our participants. Consistent with our findings, research on adverse childhood experiences shows that previous violent and sexual victimization is acute among the female offending population (Altintas & Bilici, 2018).

The women in our sample tended to speak about their victimization experiences dispassionately, as others might recount a traffic accident or change of residence—as events that were consequential and unfortunate, but also as a common and unremarkable part of their lives. Being incarcerated with a group of women who share comparable histories serves to make victimization a common frame of reference consistent with their own life experiences.

In light of these pervasive patterns of victimization, it is perhaps not surprising that our second major finding was that the women were deeply cynical about the value of the legal system and did not see the police as having much legitimacy. There was a general air of mistrust among the women when asked about police and the state. This was often manifest in their belief that even if they did report their victimization experiences, no one would actually care or take them seriously. When the police *did* lay charges in the case of the man who abused Lucy, for example, the violence committed against her did not result in the type of sentence she saw as appropriate or sufficient to dissuade future attacks. Such beliefs were common, and often grounded in women’s lived experiences of policing, something that could arguably contribute to future patterns of victimization, as the women seemed disinclined to contact the police even in extreme emergencies.

The third theme the women in our sample talked about at length concerned the challenges of being a mother while in custody, something that can produce additional forms of trauma for both mother and child. Having someone from your household incarcerated has been identified in the literature as yet another form of adverse childhood experience (Finkelhor, Shattuck, Turner, & Hamby, 2015; Hotelling, Lewis, & Smith, 1990) and something that can result in the unfortunate tendency of histories of abuse, victimization, and criminalization to repeat themselves across generations. From a labeling perspective (Hirschi, 1977), the shame felt by these women by virtue of being told by officials that they are not “fit” mothers or deserving to be in contact with their child can undermine their self-worth, reinforcing a sense that they are incapable of raising their children on their own.

The fourth major finding was that the women in our sample suffered from both addiction and mental health issues but lacked access to prison-based services that could provide appropriate counselling and harm reduction. While mental health services were available to women who were acutely mentally ill, most believed that better access to counsellors and psychiatrists for all women was desperately needed.

The final and perhaps most unexpected theme in the data relates to the fact that the women saw benefits to their own incarceration. While this appears paradoxical and perhaps perverse in light of the well-known “pains of imprisonment” (Sykes, 1958) and assorted personal and psychological harms associated with incarceration (Haney, 2003; Liebling & Maruna, 2013), the women were unambiguous on this point. Many saw remand as a “safe place,” providing a “roof over our heads,” and a place where they received “three meals a day” and could take steps towards addressing their substance misuse. What they were articulating, however, was ultimately not an endorsement of prison, but a condemnation of the level of services available to them outside of prison.

CONCLUSION

Canada is known internationally as a social welfare state. However, as we saw in our sample of 39 remanded women, due to their status as some of the most marginalized members of Canadian society, they were often disconnected from social services and assorted benefits that are the hallmark of the welfare state. Their lives were over-determined by intersecting dynamics of victimization, poverty, racialization, addiction, homelessness, and other axes of marginalization and vulnerability. As a result, one of the few places where the women in our sample made (temporary) connections with the social welfare system was in prison, although such contact was often tangential, and certainly inadequate.

In some interesting and perhaps unsettling ways, the experiences of the women we interviewed challenges some prominent characterizations of prisons in the critical literature. In her argument for prison abolition, for example, McLeod (2015) states that “incarceration and prison-backed policing neither redress nor repair the very sorts of harms they are supposed to address—interpersonal violence, addiction, mental illness and sexual abuse, among others” (p. 1156). While the women we interviewed by no means suggested that they leave the remand center rehabilitated, they consistently indicated that, on almost all the points raised by McLeod, they believed themselves to be safer and better served inside prison than outside. This is absolutely not an argument *for* prison, but it does suggest that a dispassionate evaluation of the full gamut of benefits and harms of incarceration as seen from the perspective(s) of prisoners is necessary. Writing at the historical moment when a good degree of cynicism had emerged about the prospect that prisons might play a role in “rehabilitating” people, Stan Cohen anticipated such a position. He suggested that we might need to re-calibrate our expectations about what progressive possibilities existed in prison and to concentrate on a realistic and modest assessment of what might be accomplished: “The good that might be done, would be to touch the ‘incidental’ problems which the positivist filter cannot but pick up: alcoholism, chronic ill-health, illiteracy and learning disability, psychological disturbance, ignorance or powerlessness about claiming welfare rights, legal problems, homelessness, etc.” (Cohen, 1985, 257).

Listening with an open mind to the women in our sample detail the challenges that they faced suggests that their most acute problems were not the barbarity of the prison regime, despite the undeniable problems and frequent injustices

characteristic of incarceration. Instead, the most heart-wrenching situations they faced typically related to a lack of access to the myriad other social and institutional supports that so many people take for granted, including protection from physical and sexual abuse, access to stable housing, addiction support, medical and dental treatment, mental health supports, trauma counselling, and the like. It is in this context of intersecting forms of victimization, substance abuse, loss of children, and mental health concerns that our findings must be understood. No one should conclude that the prison we studied treats the women in our sample well, but it does provide the bare necessities and forms of security that many of them cannot access while on the street. While some might be tempted to dismiss these virtues as inconsequential and not deserving of note, the women themselves certainly do not.

Following from this insight, our findings suggest that criminal justice practitioners, activists, and scholars might be best served by concentrating on the underlying issues that lead to incarceration. Unless these issues are addressed in advance and appropriate services are put in place, efforts towards decarceration risk returning the women we talked with to the street, a location many of them told us was more dangerous and intolerable than the time they spend in remand.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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