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Media Representation of Incarcerated Mothers: *Born Behind Bars*

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Abstract

With the rise in women's incarceration rates in the United States, the number of mothers and pregnant women behind bars has increased significantly in recent decades. Despite this growing prison population, the general public has little exposure to incarcerated mothers and often forms views of crime, justice, and offenders based on media representations. However, limited research has focused on the way incarcerated mothers in prison nurseries are portrayed by the media. The current study addresses this gap by analyzing the A&E television show, *Born Behind Bars*, which follows the experiences of incarcerated mothers and their infants participating in a prison nursery within the Indiana Women's Prison. This show portrays the prison nursery unit as a solution for addressing the conflicting ideologies surrounding motherhood and criminality. Despite efforts to portray the prison nursery as a 'radical' program for handling incarcerated mothers, the show ultimately reinforces a traditional approach to crime and criminals, failing to challenge stereotypes around motherhood and criminality and promoting individual-level solutions for reducing recidivism.

Keywords: prison, incarcerated mothers, A&E, *Born Behind Bars*, Indiana Women's Prison, recidivism

Introduction

The U.S. prison population increased markedly beginning in the mid-1970s through 2009, and continues to lead the world in incarceration rates with 655 out of 100,000 people incarcerated in 2017 (Simpson, Stehl, & Mehta, 2020; Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2018; Walmsley, 2018). Because women's rates of offending and incarceration historically have been very low, their rates of incarceration have increased faster than any other group in this period of mass incarceration (Britton et al., 2017). Currently, women account for 7.6% of the total state and federal prison population (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2018).

With the growth in women's incarceration since the mid-1970s, the U.S. corrections system has needed to focus more heavily on the specific experiences and healthcare needs of pregnant inmates. Limited data are collected on pregnancy rates in U.S. prisons; however, one recent study analyzed 22 state prisons and the Federal Bureau of Prisons, finding that approximately 3-4% of women were pregnant upon intake between 2016 and 2017. This number varied significantly by state (Sufrin et al., 2019). Despite the impact prison increasingly has on women, research and media have focused minimal attention on this particular inmate population (Cecil, 2015).

Literature Review

A wide body of research demonstrates that media imagery has a substantial impact on the public's perceptions of crime, views of offenders, and support for criminal justice policies (Chiricos et al., 2000; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2004; Hurley et al., 2015; Roberts & Hough, 2013). In particular, those with limited personal experience with the criminal justice system often rely on the media for their understanding of offenders and punishment (Pickett et al., 2015). It is important to note that those adults who rely on the media for information about the criminal justice system are significantly more likely to hold incorrect knowledge about the system's policies and practices (Pickett et al., 2015). Despite the recognition of media's impact on the public's perceptions of crime, very few studies have examined the way female inmates are portrayed in the media, and no studies were found that thoroughly analyze the way incarcerated mothers in prison nurseries are depicted. Therefore, the current study provides a valuable contribution in filling this empirical gap.

Historically, portrayals of female inmates in film have centered around women's femininity and sexuality, whereas modern media imagery tends to emphasize the tough, masculine, and violent female offenders. Both early and modern representations commonly rely on the sexualization of female inmates to appeal to their audiences (Bouclin, 2009; Cecil, 2015).

In the 1960s, exploitation style films, also referred to as "babes-behind-bars," were developed as one of the primary forms of media imagery of female inmates (Cecil, 2015). These exploitation style films, such as *99 Women* (Franco, 1969) depicted inmates as vulnerable and sexualized in order to appeal to a heterosexual male audience. Many films and shows today continue to rely on the "babes-behind-bars" representations when portraying female inmates (Cecil, 2015).

However, the imagery of female inmates in the media changed significantly in 2013 with the prison series on Netflix, *Orange is the New Black* (Cecil, 2015). This series relies on some of the typical oversexualized representations of incarcerated women engaged in sexual activity with other inmates. Nevertheless, the series also portrays many of the challenges faced by inmates, including addiction, physical and mental illness, pregnancy, and barriers to reentry and recidivism that previous media imagery has failed to incorporate (Cecil, 2015). For example, in one study of ten television shows focused on female inmates, Cecil (2007) found that violent offenders were overrepresented, mental illness and histories of abuse were underrepresented, and sexual relationships among inmates within prison were overemphasized and sensationalized. The depictions of women in talk shows, documentaries, and the news ultimately frame women

in a way that legitimize their incarceration and allow the general public to view incarceration as a reasonable response to their needs. Moreover, documentaries and other media often reinforce stereotypes of female inmates, overlook many significant challenges they face, and underrepresent mothers (Cecil, 2007; Cecil, 2015; Farr, 2000).

In a study on documentaries featuring female inmates, of the 98 incarcerated women depicted only 33% were described as mothers, a rate much lower than the approximately 66% of incarcerated women who are actually mothers (Cecil, 2007). Documentaries provide only brief depictions of incarcerated mothers, primarily portraying them as bad women who have failed to do what is necessary to stay with their children (Cecil, 2015). Cecil (2015) notes that *Orange is the New Black* added complexity to the portrayal of female inmates. Specifically, this series includes the story of a pregnant inmate, Maria Ruiz, and the challenge of separating from her child after giving birth. However, some of the common issues faced by pregnant inmates are not discussed in the show, such as shackling inmates and finding a caretaker for one's child after giving birth (Cecil, 2015).

Previous studies that focus on the portrayals of incarcerated women and mothers shed light on the gendered stereotypes around criminality, as well as the attempt to obscure offenders' identities as mothers. The current study begins to fill the gap in the literature on incarcerated mothers in prison nursery units by focusing the analysis on the media portrayal of this specific group of female inmates.

Using a feminist criminology approach, the media representations are analyzed from the perspective that gender is socially constructed and embedded within social institutions, including prisons and media (Renzetti, 2013). The feminist criminology perspective challenges mainstream assumptions about gender and allows one to deconstruct taken-for-granted messages promoted by the media. Moreover, this approach recognizes that media representations of groups can have harmful outcomes for groups by reproducing gender, racial, and class inequality, among others (Renzetti, 2013).

Competing Ideologies and Stereotypes

In order to examine how competing ideologies and stereotypes surrounding 'criminals' and 'mothers' are negotiated within contemporary society, the portrayal of incarcerated mothers in the prison nursery unit in Indiana Women's Prison will be analyzed for this study. The media portrayals of this particular group of offenders/mothers highlights the instability of the stereotypes used against each of these populations, and raises questions about the treatment of offenders in general, as well as incarcerated mothers specifically.

Generally, 'criminals' tend to be stereotyped as male, racial minorities, manipulative, aggressive, and hot-tempered, among other characteristics (MacLin & Herrera, 2006; Welch, 2007). Stereotypes exaggerate differences between groups of people and often essentialize racial and gender groups (Schneider, 2004). According to previous research, stereotypes of offenders differ based on gender, race, and ethnicity (Britton, 2003; Lehmann, 2020). Male offenders tend to be viewed as more violent while female offenders are often viewed as highly emotional, manipulative, and petty (Britton, 2003). Black and Hispanic offenders are often stereotyped as more dangerous and blameworthy than their white counterparts, particularly when convicted of more serious offenses (Lehmann, 2020). The treatment of offenders is shaped by these stereotypes wherein Black and Hispanic offenders receive harsher sentences for crimes like manslaughter, and women experience more infantilization while incarcerated compared to men (Britton et al., 2017; Britton, 2003; Lehmann, 2020, Rafter, 1985).

In contrast to the stereotypes the general public holds with regards to criminal offenders, stereotypes of mothers tend to revolve around opposing characteristics. Women and mothers, in general, are commonly viewed as naturally nurturing, self-sacrificing, and possessing of a maternal instinct to do what is best for their children (Arendell, 2000). However, stereotypes around motherhood differ based on race and ethnicity as well.

For instance, in one recent study, participants were more likely to view black pregnant women as single, more promiscuous, and in need of public support compared to white pregnant women (Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016).

The motherhood ideology contains notions about the family unit as white, middle-class, and heteronormative (Arendell, 2000). The dominant parenting ideology in the U.S. today is that of intensive motherhood, which includes the idea that the primary caretaker of children should be the mother, that children should be the top priority of all mothers, and that raising children should require a significant amount of time, energy, and resources (Arendell, 2000; Wade & Ferree, 2014; Hays, 1998). This ideology is evident in the fact that prison nurseries only exist within women's prisons and have not been implemented in men's prisons in the United States.

Despite the dominant perception in society that a mother's central role should be to raise her children, the experience of incarcerated mothers sheds light on the conflicting stereotypes and ideologies around 'criminals' and 'mothers.' Both groups tend to be essentialized, wherein the public views criminals as inherently bad people and views mothers as inherently nurturing (MacLin & Herrera, 2006; Welch, 2007; Arendell, 2000). Combining these identities challenges the stereotypes of each and the notion that these characteristics are fixed and innate. Instead of being able to rely conveniently on one or the other, the public is pushed to consider which stereotypes apply when it comes to incarcerated mothers, and how to treat this group of offenders. Prison nurseries offer one strategy for simultaneously holding onto our ideologies around motherhood and the contradictory stereotypes we have for 'criminals.'

Prison Nurseries

Even among women's prisons, prison nursery programs are very rare, existing in only eight states in the U.S. currently. However, prison nurseries have a long history in the U.S., beginning in 1901 with Bedford Hills in New York and later phasing out of these programs through the 1940s-1960s due to the costs and public perceptions of incarcerating infants (Luther & Gregson, 2011). Today, there is renewed support for prison nurseries, but their numbers remain low (Elmalak, 2015). These programs are typically focused on the goal of promoting bonds, or secure attachments, between mothers and infants, often with the ultimate aim of rehabilitation and reducing recidivism (Fearn & Parker, 2004). Underlying many of these programs is the perception that women who bond with their children will have more incentive to refrain from criminal activity after their release. In fact, many studies find that the transition to motherhood is associated with desistance from future criminal activity (Giordano et al., 2002; Rodermond et al., 2016). Monsbakken et al. (2013) found that criminal activity declined for mothers prior to childbirth but not after the child was born; however, other studies demonstrate that motherhood can reduce recidivism more consistently (Rodermond et al., 2016).

Several studies also demonstrate the effectiveness of prison nurseries in supporting a bond between mothers and infants, reducing recidivism rates for incarcerated women, and improving the well-being of the children (Goshin et al., 2013; Byrne et al., 2010; Loper & Tuerk, 2006). Children who participated in prison nurseries as infants had reduced anxiety and depression in preschool compared to their counterparts who were separated from their mothers while incarcerated (Goshin et al., 2014).

Despite the efficacy of these programs, not all pregnant inmates have the opportunity to participate in the prison nursery once their baby is born. Instead, many babies are separated from their mothers and live with another parent, relative, or in foster care while the mother completes her sentence (Enos, 2001). Prison nurseries often rely on strict criteria for admissions into the program (Luther & Gregson, 2011). For instance, to qualify for the Wee One's Nursery, which is the focus of the series analyzed for the current study, women must meet several conditions. They cannot have a history of violent offenses or child abuse/endangerment, they must be pregnant at the time they are placed in custody of the Indiana Department of Corrections, have at least an 8th grade reading level, and have the possibility of a release date that is 18 months or less following the estimated

due date of their baby, among several other standards. Nannies must meet similar criteria regarding non-violent offense histories, reading levels, and they must have completed a Department of Corrections parenting class (State of Indiana, 2018).

As a unique group, women in prison nurseries face specific challenges and experiences that are rarely portrayed in the media. Because media representations can influence criminal justice policy and public attitudes towards crime and offenders, a critical analysis of these representations is necessary.

Methods

The mainstream reality television series, *Born Behind Bars*, was analyzed for this study using qualitative content analysis (Neuendorf, 2017; Hijmans, 1996). While documentaries of varying lengths exist that focus on incarcerated mothers and nursery programs, this show was chosen for analysis because it is the only television series in the United States that focuses specifically on the population of incarcerated mothers. All ten episodes of *Born Behind Bars*, a reality television show which aired on A&E in 2018, were analyzed. At the time of this study this show only had one season aired. The series follows incarcerated women who are part of the Wee One's Nursery (W.O.N.) program inside Indiana Women's Prison.

To analyze the way incarcerated women are portrayed in the media, the researcher used interpretive analysis of the content (Hijmans, 1996). This method involves developing conceptual categories, or themes, based on patterns and trends within the data and relating these categories to one another in order to develop theory or illustrate theoretical concepts. To engage in this form of interpretive content analysis, the researcher viewed all episodes of the series in order while taking notes about themes represented in the show. The imagery, sound effects and music, titles of episodes, and written statements used throughout the episodes were noted in addition to the behavior and comments of the inmates and staff. After developing general themes, the researcher re-watched all episodes for an in-depth analysis that allowed for re-working and refining of the major themes pertaining to how incarcerated mothers are portrayed in the show. An inter-rater was used to enhance the reliability of the analysis. The themes were provided to the inter-rater who viewed three episodes of the series. Overall, there was significant inter-rater reliability. Both researchers agreed on the relevance and applicability of all general themes for analysis. Themes were then considered in relation to one another and the broader discourse on prisons and punishment in the U.S. in order to add meaning to the categories.

Analysis

Born Behind Bars depicts the prison nursery as an appropriate and promising response to crime. The show emphasizes the benefits of prison nurseries, focusing primarily on the importance of the mother-child bond for reducing recidivism. Additionally, the nursery unit is depicted in juxtaposed terms as simultaneously a nurturing and punitive, zero-tolerance space.

Portrayal of the Nursery Unit

At the beginning of each episode, a statement appears on the screen which reads, "Studies show that it is critical for the social, intellectual, and physical development of infants to bond with their mothers in the first year of life" (Ellis et al., 2018, 1.1). In the first episode, a statement also appears early on across the screen which says, "If they can make it through, both babies and moms have a strong chance to stay out of prison for good" (2018, 1.1). The show avoids inundating viewers with the complexities involved in measuring the effectiveness of prison nurseries on bonding and recidivism rates (Loper & Tuerk, 2006). Instead, a simple message is provided, referencing evidence, describing the programs as effective, and reaffirming the role of

individual responsibility while denying structural constraints faced by women. While the show includes stories of the challenges women face within the prison nursery, *Born Behind Bars* takes a clear stance on this program, portraying it as a good opportunity for inmates to change their criminal trajectories.

The show also includes staff and inmates describing the benefits of the prison nurseries throughout the season, particularly emphasizing the mother-child bond. For example, inmates discuss the motivation that bonding with their children provides for them with regards to avoiding crime in the future. One mother, Taylor, explained that she was not accepted into the prison nursery during her previous stay in prison and was therefore unable to feel a bond with her daughter when she was released. Referring to her daughter, Taylor says, “She didn’t know me. When she’d cry she wouldn’t want me, so I left and started doing drugs” (Ellis et al., 2018, 1.1). Now, with twins on the way, she is hoping to be accepted into the prison nursery and she explains, “If I get to keep the twins here, I feel like it will make me do better and me be a mother. Whereas, the first time I didn’t feel like I was a mother. So I messed up and came back” (2018, 1.1). This woman’s comments demonstrate the connection that she, like many other inmates and staff members on the show, make between being a mother and avoiding criminal behavior. For instance, another woman in the unit, Stephanie, explains that she feels like she has let her oldest son down stating, “What I’ve done in the past, that’s not what a good mom would do. My kids deserve better” (Ellis et al., 2018, 1.10). Despite their past, Taylor’s comments imply that the solution for ‘becoming’ a mother in her case is it to participate in this prison nursery program.

Cunningham, a prison staff member, reiterates a similar sentiment regarding the benefits of the prison nursery, including the ability to ‘become’ a mother through this program. In Episode 1, Cunningham explains that,

The Wee One’s program definitely gives the offenders an opportunity to finally learn to be a mother. They’re less likely to come back because they are really invested in the future of a family. But, none of them are here for singing too loud in Sunday School. And we have to remember that (2018).

These comments reflect the perception that the women who are incarcerated in this unit do not yet know how to be good mothers. Instead, this program is viewed as one that will teach them, and in that process they will be rehabilitated. In these statements, motherhood is not only treated as inconsistent with the criminal behavior of these women, but as the solution for reducing recidivism. Cunningham’s final comment about the inmates’ offenses adds to the portrayal of the women in this unit as serious offenders who deserve to be punished, reinforcing a standard depiction in modern media of incarcerated women as threatening (Cecil, 2015).

This staff member also comments on the benefits of the prison nursery for the well-being of the children explaining, “You look at the age that you really mark a child. Those 30 months, that’s the meat. The mother bonding with the child and the child having that closeness with somebody that loves them, that might break that cycle. This individual may not end up like mom and dad.” Comments like these throughout the show emphasize how crucial the mother-child bond is for reducing crime for the mother and the children. Furthermore, such comments function to deny broader structural conditions that can influence the likelihood of arrest and incarceration that many children born into marginalized communities may face (Sampson & Wilson, 1996).

The portrayal of the Wee One’s Nursery vacillates between a zero-tolerance environment and a supportive place for mothers and infants to bond. Frequently the unit is depicted in contrast to the rest of the prison as nurturing and pleasant. Imagery and sound effects from other prison dorms are flashed at various points throughout the episodes. These images involve women locked in their cells, pounding on their small cell windows with voices yelling and screaming in the background. Some women are handcuffed through small openings in the door, reflecting the maximum security of this prison and the lack of autonomy in other units. The sensations of these images and sounds remind viewers of the intimidating, overwhelming, and

dehumanizing nature of the prison environment. They are a reflection of the broader prison context within which The Wee One's Nursery is housed.

Adding to this context, each episode begins with the voice of a staff member stating, "In a maximum security prison with infants there has to be boundaries" followed by another officer saying, "We said zero tolerance. We mean zero tolerance." Lastly, an inmate's voice is expressed, "It's not supposed to be nice. It's prison" (Ellis et al., 2018). Since these statements are repeated at the beginning of each episode, they set the stage for the show and the nursery unit, appealing to those viewers who are drawn to crime media, while reinforcing the view that prisons should be harsh places aimed at implementing a tough-on-crime approach (Mauer, 2001).

The presentation of the prison as employing a tough-on-crime stance can often be lost on the nursery unit, which is frequently portrayed as supportive and nurturing. However, the message of zero-tolerance is reiterated throughout the nursery with references to the criteria for qualifying to be in the unit, the strict rules one must abide by while in this dorm, and the high stakes for breaking any rules, including having your baby taken away.

This binary portrayal of the nursery unit, between a nurturing space and a maximum security setting, further reinforces the good/bad characteristics of the criminalization of women. Either they are good mothers who deserve to have their child or bad mothers who deserve maximum security and separation from their children. Failure to live up to the expectations of the intensive motherhood ideology is met with severe consequences which constantly threaten the women and control their behavior.

The threat of having one's baby taken away is portrayed as a significant concern for many women in the first episode of the show titled, 'They Can Take Your Baby Away.' Indeed, the threat of losing one's child, potentially permanently, plays a significant role in the lives of the women in this unit. This fear is expressed by several women throughout the show, often when their baby goes to a doctor appointment and may not return, or in the context of rule-violations within the unit. The staff can decide the inmate is no longer fit to continue in the program and their baby will be taken from them. In this case, a caretaker needs to be arranged, such as another parent or relative, or the infant will be placed in foster care.

In addition to reflecting the high stakes, vulnerability, and lack of autonomy the inmates experience as parents, this episode reinforces the idea that even those in the 'softer' nursery unit are still 'criminals' who deserve to be stripped of their rights and punished through a tough-on-crime approach (Ellis et al., 2018). At one point in the episode, an image of a written document listing the policies and highlighting various rules is scrolled across the screen. These rules range from who is allowed on the unit to guidelines against profanity. The staff describe the rules as necessary for the safety of the babies. One staff member who works closely with the nursery unit explains that the first priority is to operate as a prison, to maintain safety and security, not as a nursery. Stephanie, an incarcerated mother, references the strict rules and high stakes of the unit in the first episode, explaining that this is the "hardest time I've ever done. You're walking on eggshells because of your baby" (Ellis et al., 2018, 1.1). Despite efforts to frame the prison nursery as a 'radical' program, a term used in the introduction of each episode, the zero-tolerance approach reflects the continuation of a very traditional view of crime and criminals in which offenders are seen as deserving of harsh punishment and undeserving of most rights and autonomy.

This zero-tolerance approach, combined with the goal of the safety of the infants, provides the prison with a justification for stripping the inmates of their parental autonomy in several ways, including with regards to medical care. When pregnant women on the series were going to be induced into labor, they were given less than twenty-four hours' notice. Similarly, they were not given prior notice when their child was going back to the hospital for doctors' appointments. This practice is described as necessary for the safe and secure operations of the prison. For example, staff mention the possibility of relatives showing up at the appointments if enough notice is provided to inmates. In these events, staff claim that relatives may try taking the babies home with

them or smuggling drugs back into the prison through the babies. Including these staff explanations on the series reinforces the imagery of female inmates, and their families, as conniving and manipulative (Britton, 2003).

The inmates on the series express significant stress when their babies are taken to doctors' appointments, with conversations about the possibility the baby will not return depending on their health. This reasonably provokes strong feelings of vulnerability and anxiety for the women, which have been noted in previous studies interviewing pregnant inmates (Abbott, 2018; Fritz & Whiteacre, 2015). The show depicts the prison nursery as a space where women support one another and fails to reflect the true vulnerability many of these women have reported feeling in interviews (Abbott, 2018).

In contrast to the hardcore, zero-tolerance image of the prison nursery unit, much commentary and imagery throughout the show portrays the unit as a supportive and pleasant environment. Newly admitted women, like Taylor, describe their surprise by how nice the nursery unit is compared to their previous units. Inmates and staff remark on the fact the women in this unit have their own room with their baby, as opposed to sharing with another inmate. Colorful painted bubble letters and butterflies float down the walls of the unit, bringing a child-like innocence and feel to the space which is in stark contrast to the typical bleak prison walls. A central space filled with baby swings, play mats, and toys brings additional color and joy to an otherwise austere environment. The physical make-up and feel of the nursery unit reflects important distinctions between this unit and the rest of the prison. Maranda, a nanny who had been living on the unit, describes this contrast as well. While commenting on her decision to be moved to another unit and end her role as a nanny, she explains that she is not sure why she wants to be put back in general population since it is like choosing to go from the "penthouse" to "the projects. It's more like prison over there" (Ellis et al., 2018, 1.6). Portrayals of innocence and joy, and perhaps even luxury, are mixed with zero-tolerance within the nursery unit.

The supportive dynamic between inmates is highlighted in scenes when a woman goes into labor and other women from the unit decorate her room, fill her crib with baby bottles, toys, and blankets while she is in the hospital. One staff member commented that the nursery unit provides a more nurturing environment than many of the women in this unit would experience outside of prison (Ellis et al., 2018). Indeed, studies have documented the opportunities for therapy and support for addiction and prenatal healthcare available to women in prison who otherwise do not have these supports (Baldwin et al., 2015).

The portrayal of the nursery unit as full of color, toys, smiling babies and support is a way the show, and likely the prison itself, reinforces the image of prison nurseries as an appropriate space for infants and mothers. Depicting the inmates supporting one another with preparations for the baby creates the perception of the prison nursery as a comfortable and healthy space for women to care for their infants. Despite the many ways women in this unit are undermined as mothers, stripped of their humanity and autonomy, and incapacitated through their incarceration, the images of the nursery unit invoke the notion that the prison nursery is a great opportunity and a reasonable solution for handling incarcerated mothers and infants.

Portrayal of the Mothers in the Nursery Unit

Like the portrayal of the prison nursery, the individual mothers in the nursery unit are subjected to the juxtaposed depictions of themselves as both criminals and mothers, simultaneously humanized and demonized. The mothers in the nursery unit are humanized in ways their fellow inmates are not. For example, they are often referred to as 'mama' by some of the staff. This contrasts the use of an inmate's number or last name in other units, which is impersonal and dehumanizing. Additionally, those in the nursery unit are often shown holding, rocking, and cuddling their babies, celebrating their first steps, and worrying over their health and when they will see them again while the baby visits the doctor. They frequently seek out one another for emotional support and express their vulnerability. These images reflect their identities as 'mothers,' matching the stereotypes and

expectations the public holds for a ‘good mother’s’ actions and emotions toward her infant. However, their criminal behavior and addiction is consistently highlighted as well (Ellis et al., 2018).

The constant reminder of the women’s criminal status is reinforced in a variety of ways throughout the episodes. For instance, at the beginning of each episode, loud pounding music plays with images of an ambulance, women escorted in handcuffs, and cell doors signaling the intensity of the drama. The words ‘addict,’ ‘thief,’ ‘dealer,’ ‘mother’ are flashed quickly on the screen. These terms reflect the multiple identities of these women; however, they only focus on certain aspects of their identity. Rather than including additional facets to demonstrate the true complexity of the people in this unit, this list can be summarized into two categories: mothers and criminals. The largest emphasis is on the criminal identity, wherein most of these words can be associated with criminal behavior, while the only term that is not associated with crime is ‘mother.’

In addition to this imagery at the beginning of each episode, women are introduced throughout the episodes in a way that reminds viewers of their ‘criminal’ identity. When each woman appears on the screen, usually in an interview for the show, a pause occurs wherein a mug-shot like image of the woman is portrayed along with a list of her crimes and sentence. This image appears in conjunction with the sound effect of a slamming cell door. The imagery and sound effects remind viewers of the sensationalized criminal identities of the women on screen, provoking the notion that prison as punishment is deserved.

Women are also shown engaging in stereotypical ‘inmate’ behavior, such as ‘busting moves,’ or going places they are not supposed to in the prison in order to see girlfriends in other units, getting in arguments with inmates, calling each other ‘snitches’ and using a variety of prison slang (Ellis et al., 2018, 1.2). To reinforce the ‘criminal’ identity of the women in this unit, the series relies on typical modern media portrayals of female inmates as tough and threatening (Cecil, 2015). Several episodes focus very little attention on issues pertaining to infants or parenting, and instead emphasize the women as inmates navigating the dynamics of prison life and relationships with other inmates. The choice to focus more heavily on the ‘criminal’ identity of the women in this unit likely reflects the desire to appeal to audiences interested in crime media. However, the show misses the opportunity to challenge the perception that the identity of ‘mother’ and ‘criminal’ cannot coexist.

Brandi, a woman living in the nursery unit is the focus of many episodes and is described as one of the toughest women in the unit. Brandi explains to the camera, “you have to have a backbone, because if not, I’m going to push you over” (Ellis et al., 2018: 1.1). In many ways, Brandi is a prime example of the way female inmates are depicted in modern media as tough, masculine, and sexually involved with other inmates (Cecil, 2015). However, her identity as a loving mother throughout the series adds complexity to the typical portrayal of modern female inmates.

Emphasizing the ‘criminal’ identity of the women in the Wee One’s Nursery reinforces the perception that women are lucky to have the opportunity to participate in this program. This privilege is further emphasized by the limited number of women who can participate and the demographics of the unit. The Wee One’s Nursery unit, as depicted on *Born Behind Bars*, is predominantly made up of white female inmates (Ellis et al., 2018). Despite the blatant gender and racial demographics of the unit, these topics are rarely discussed on the show and instead are taken for granted. With the exception of one episode in which the issue of racism arises, the show portrays white women as the ‘normal’ recipients of the privilege to participate in the prison nursery without presenting questions, critiques, or explanations for how the unequal demographics in this unit emerged.

However, one episode of *Born Behind Bars* does focus specifically on the issue of racial prejudice and racism within the unit. When a new black woman enters the nursery awaiting the birth of her child, rumors of her being a ‘thief’ emerge alongside reports of a stolen radio on the unit. Women take sides and gossip about their distrust for the new woman (Ellis et al., 2018). As the dominant racial group, white people and whiteness are normalized in society. Therefore, within a predominantly white group, race commonly remains invisible until referenced with a person or group of color (McIntosh, 1989). This dimension of white privilege is evident

on the show when the racial disparities in the prison nursery are only acknowledged once a new black woman enters the unit despite the fact that race and the racial demographics have been an ever-present issue.

The incident regarding the stolen radio led some inmates and an officer to discuss the demographics of the unit in general, noting the fact that most women in the Wee One's Nursery are white. The inmates describe the prison and nursery as racist, permitting only white women into this privileged unit (Ellis et al., 2018). The racialized treatment of incarcerated women has occurred in the United States for centuries with the emergence of Reformatory institutions, primarily reserved for White women, beginning in the mid-1800s (Rafter, 1985).

In addition to largely overlooking the role of racism in corrections, the show neglects many social factors that contribute to crime. Instead, crime is portrayed as stemming from individual-level problems requiring punishment or counseling as solutions. When describing the criminal pasts of the incarcerated mothers, the series provides only a brief historical backdrop to explain their deviance. For example, Stephanie and Brandi, like most women in the show, are described as having problems with addiction. Several women also describe their relationships to abusive men who involved them in drugs and associated crimes. Histories of abuse and addiction are well-noted within feminist criminology, and incarcerated women are especially likely to have a history of experiencing severe abuse (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2013; Daly, 1992).

Born Behind Bars portrays these common issues faced by female inmates and describes some of the classes and treatment options available while they are in prison. This is an improvement upon most media imagery of female inmates, which tends to overlook significant challenges including addiction and abuse (Cecil, 2015). In episode one, a group of women are speaking with a counselor about ways to identify and respond to men who are abusive in order to avoid relationships that are destructive in the future. Additionally, many women on the show are enrolled in drug and alcohol classes (Ellis et al., 2018). Focusing solutions and rehabilitation on developing individual skills, such as those to identify abusive partners, may be useful, but these strategies do not address the structural conditions that are the foundation for much crime.

Discussion

As Cecil (2015) describes, media rarely provides in-depth coverage of the experiences of incarcerated mothers. Films and shows that depict incarcerated mothers often portray them as bad women who have failed to do what is necessary to remain with their child (Cecil, 2015). *Born Behind Bars* maintains this message. Inmates describe feeling like a failure as a mother because of their absence in their older children's lives. In contrast, the prison nursery is presented as the solution for the mothers and their children.

Statements from inmates and staff throughout the series highlight the benefits of the prison nursery for rehabilitation, 'learning' to be mothers, and reducing recidivism for mothers and children. However, the prominent solutions promoted in the nursery unit ignore the social structural forces that are commonly responsible for criminal activity (Sampson & Laub, 1993; Sampson et al., 2002; Sampson & Wilson, 1996). Bonding with their infants and identity transformation into motherhood are framed as sufficient for reducing recidivism. Research indicates that these factors are important for desistance from crime; however, focusing only on these elements does not tell the whole story (Sampson & Laub 1993; Girodano et al., 2002). Absent from these discussions is the role of the social conditions that the mother and child will live in after prison and the criminogenic factors that many people face upon re-entry following a prison sentence. These conditions, such as neighborhoods high in poverty, urbanization, unemployment, among other factors, can lead to crime and undermine the significance of a parent-child bond or one's identity transformation (Sampson & Wilson, 1996). Despite research identifying the causes of crime and recidivism, media like *Born Behind Bars* reinforces the belief that one's social context is insignificant, and instead an individual is solely to blame for his/her criminal activity (Sampson et al., 2002).

Portraying crime as an individual issue rather than a social problem reinforces the perception of prison as a reasonable solution to crime. By emphasizing individual responsibility, this series fails to present an accurate depiction of the role of the legal system in women's incarceration. Beginning with the law-and-order movement in the late 1960s, state and federal laws increased the duration of prison sentences, particularly for drug offenses, and have expanded the types of crimes receiving prison time (Mauer, 2001). These policy changes significantly increased the number of women serving prison sentences (Britton et al., 2017). However, the show does not explore the impact of these policies on the women in this unit. Framing the problem of their incarceration as an individual problem allows the legal system to remain invisible and fails to acknowledge this key factor in the problem of women's increased incarceration rates (Britton et al., 2017; Mauer, 2001).

Throughout the series, the prison staff are depicted as proudly supporting the tough-on-crime approach, describing the nursery as a zero-tolerance space full of rules and lacking in inmate rights. This treatment of offenders is portrayed as appropriate and necessary. The discretion afforded to the prison staff in determining the rules, who has followed the rules, and therefore who is fit to stay with their children reflects the patriarchal role of the criminal justice system. *Born Behind Bars* does little to shed light on the degree of discretion afforded to the staff or to highlight the training or qualifications staff have for making these crucial decisions that have the potential to severely disrupt families.

Staff withhold information from pregnant women and new mothers regarding the timing of one's induction into labor or medical appointments for the infants. To justify this practice, the staff portray the inmates and their families as conniving and manipulative, relying on common stereotypes of female inmates (Britton, 2003). In addition to these stereotypes, the staff justify invoking considerable stress on the inmates by claiming this is necessary for the "safety of the baby." This practice of staff withholding information about medical appointments has been noted in previous research as creating significant stress for women in prison nursery units, such as the Wee One's Nursery (Fritz & Whiteacre, 2015). Nevertheless, this show depicts the practice as a bureaucratic procedure for normal operations of the prison, necessary for the "safety of the baby," or necessary to avoid being manipulated by female inmates and their families. In all cases, placing added stress on the women in this unit and dehumanizing them by failing to provide them with reasonable knowledge about their own healthcare, is portrayed as necessary and legitimate.

Besides depicting the short notice for doctor's appointments and the conversations among women in the unit, the series does not thoroughly delve into the experiences of stress and anxiety for the women in the prison nursery. For instance, in interviews with incarcerated pregnant women, Abbott (2018) identified many women who described feeling incredibly stressed, but who also felt they had to suppress their feelings out of fear of being vulnerable or losing their baby (Abbott, 2018). The common fear of vulnerability noted by many women in Abbott's (2018) interviews is not depicted in this series. Instead the show relies on an image of the nursery unit as communal and supportive, creating the perception of a nurturing yet zero-tolerance space that can address the complicated identities of "criminal" mothers and their infants.

Portraying the prison nursery as a reasonable solution for "criminal" mothers promotes the idea that prison is a solution for crime, despite much evidence of the ineffectiveness of prisons (Cullen et al., 2011). In fact, evidence demonstrates that prisons can lead to an increase in criminal activity, as opposed to reducing recidivism (Cullen et al., 2011). In reviewing the research on the ineffectiveness of prisons, particularly for women, Baldwin (2015) argues that there is a "strong case for using alternatives to custody" when possible (p. 220). While a purely punitive approach is not promoted in *Born Behind Bars*, the model of prison as the basis for responding to crime, combined with opportunities for rehabilitation is supported.

Portrayal of the Women

Reproducing standard depictions of female inmates in modern media, *Born Behind Bars* attempts to portray the women as intimidating or violent with their mug-shots, threats, and arguments with inmates, despite the fact the women in this unit have no history of violent offenses. Additionally, the romantic and sexual relationships between inmates is a common topic in the series, similar to the standard portrayal of female inmates in the media throughout history (Cecil, 2015). Despite the fact the series attempts to display a unique group of female inmates compared to women on previous prison shows and films, it ultimately reproduces the traditional imagery of female inmates as tough, threatening, and sexualized and focuses minimal attention on the infants.

Specifically, the focus on Brandi's storyline throughout much of the series relies on many modern stereotypes of female inmates, while adding some complexity due to her role as a loving mother. Throughout the season, Brandi is depicted as someone who has significantly transformed herself through this prison nursery program and the bond she formed with her daughter. However, by the final episode, Brandi is back in the general prison population. She explains, "Everybody says well, you're a worthless mom. No, just because you're an addict doesn't mean you're a worthless mom. You just have an addiction and people just gotta get help. So that's what I'm doing now" (Ellis et al., 2018, 1.10).

Brandi's story highlights the challenges for success after leaving prison. Additionally, her perspective allows for identifying as both a good mom and an addict who has broken the law. Portraying the very real challenges of re-entry, recidivism, and addiction are an improvement over early media imagery of female inmates; however, the show does not explore any of the details of these experiences for Brandi in-depth (Cecil, 2015). Brandi's ultimate return to prison oversimplifies the challenges with addiction and re-entry faced by many inmates (Cecil, 2015). Moreover, this storyline reinforces the perception that offenders are unable to change from a criminal trajectory.

Although recidivism is common, many opportunities to successfully encourage desistance exist which are not discussed on the show (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Stable satisfactory employment, marriage, religion, and parenthood have all served as turning points for individuals who previously engaged in crime and now desist (Sampson & Laub, 1993; Giordano et al., 2002). The series overlooks the importance of programs and support for strengthening most of these informal social bonds by focusing solely on parenthood and individual-level changes. Previous research demonstrates the problem of focusing solely on individual decision-making as a solution for incarcerated mothers as opposed to recognizing the contextual factors that undermine women's attempts to desist (Michalson, 2018).

Moreover, only a select group of mothers are fortunate enough to receive the opportunity to enhance their bonds with their children as a form of rehabilitation. The legal system, state policies, and prison staff determine who can participate in the prison nurseries through sentencing, eligibility criteria, and the application process, which has resulted in an overrepresentation of White women in the nursery unit (Fritz & Whiteacre, 2015). In one study, White women made up 67% of the Wee One's Nursery, African American women made up 26%, and Latino women made up 3% (Fritz & Whiteacre, 2015). Despite the predominance of White women in the nursery unit, racial biases at the institutional level remain unexplored by the show.

On *Born Behind Bars*, White women are consistently shown on screen in the Wee One's Nursery. However, outside of a few conversations about racial inequality depicted on one episode, the show does not address these racial demographics. The series fails to represent any connections between the current racial make-up in the unit and institutional forms of discrimination that can lead to these disparities. Research consistently shows a racial and ethnic bias in sentencing where Black and Latino offenders are 4-6 times more likely to receive a prison sentence compared to White offenders (Alexander, 2012; Mustard, 2001; Warren et al., 2019). Receiving a longer sentence could disqualify women of color from participating in the prison nursery

due to the duration of sentence criteria. Additionally, because racial and ethnic biases permeate U.S. society, these prejudices may influence the decisions prison staff make regarding who is accepted into the program (Feagin, 2013). This series did not explore the role of racial/ethnic bias in the eligibility criteria or among staff.

The U.S. has a long history of intersectional disparities in corrections. Reformatory institutions of the mid-1800s were viewed as places where white women could be reformed into ‘ladies’ by learning domestic activities and their proper gender roles (Rafter, 1985). Very similarly today, predominantly white women in the Wee One’s Unit are given the opportunity to reform themselves by ‘learning’ how to be mothers. In contrast, women of color historically were sent to custodial facilities or were sent to prison farms to engage in hard agricultural labor (Rafter, 1985). The perception of who can be reformed, and who is deserving of such opportunities within the U.S. criminal justice system, has been heavily shaped by gender and race.

Future research is needed to examine the selection process for prison nursery units to address the racial disparities observed in settings like the Wee One’s Nursery (Fritz & Whiteacre, 2015). Specific aspects of the eligibility criteria, discrimination in sentencing, or application and interview process may lead to the predominance of White women receiving this opportunity and should be explored in more depth. Furthermore, future research should examine the role of prison staff in learning and understanding parenthood and childcare needs.

Conclusion

Born Behind Bars attempts to portray the prison nursery as a ‘radical’ program that addresses the complexities involved in handling incarcerated mothers. By creating a show dedicated to the experiences of incarcerated women who are pregnant or living with their infants, the series has the potential to add needed depth to the imagery around female inmates and their experiences in prison. Despite this potential, the series frequently relies on portrayals of female inmates used in the media since the 1960s, and promotes a traditional, punitive approach to crime (Cecil, 2015).

This show promotes prison nurseries as an appropriate and beneficial solution to the problem of incarceration for some mothers. In doing so, the series reproduces the notion that crime is an individual problem and prison as punishment is an appropriate response, while neglecting the social factors and policy changes that lead to incarceration for many men and women (Mauer, 2001). An alternative approach to this individualistic portrayal of crime and criminals could involve descriptions, imagery, and facts about the neighborhoods in which these women lived prior to prison. Additionally, following the women after they are released from prison would offer opportunities to portray the structural challenges they face. Including imagery and commentary on the neighborhoods, challenges associated with poverty, safety, obtaining employment, among other structural factors that influence crime and desistance could begin to provide viewers with a feminist abolitionist perspective that questions the use of prisons in favor of alternative approaches to justice that better serve mothers and children.

Furthermore, the imagery, language, and depictions of characters in the show often reproduce stereotypical representations of incarcerated women as failing to be “good” mothers, immature, intimidating, and conniving (Britton, 2003). Although the women in the nursery unit are humanized at times, depicted as caring for their infants, expressing vulnerability and emotions and supporting one another, their “criminal” identity is frequently emphasized. By reproducing stereotypical imagery of female inmates and upholding the legitimacy of a tough-on-crime response promoted by prison staff, the show overlooks broader questions about the dehumanization of individuals who are incarcerated and the U.S. criminal justice system’s reliance on incarceration for non-violent offenders.

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