

"Here They Look at Us as People": Comparing Mothers' Experiences with an Alternative to Incarceration (ATI) Program and Incarceration

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Abstract: *Approximately 60% of all incarcerated women in the United States are mothers with minor children and most of them are single mothers. When mothers with minor children are incarcerated, the disconnection and loss of tangible support can have a traumatic impact on families. Alternatives to incarceration (ATI) can be a viable option to maintain their significant relationships while holding them accountable for their crimes and providing them with necessary rehabilitation. The purpose of this study was to examine how mothers participating in an ATI program compared this experience to conventional incarceration. Data were collected from eight focus groups involving 34 mothers who were current participants or graduates of an ATI program. Data were analyzed using exploratory thematic analysis. Analysis revealed four salient themes characterized by these in vivo themes: incarceration is not rehabilitation; incarceration is easy, the program is hard; I'm not the same person; and connection with children. Findings suggest that mothers find the ATI more rehabilitative and relational than incarceration. Future research should explore outcomes for graduates of ATI specific to their rehabilitation and connections to children. A mother's readiness for change while incarcerated and when participating in an ATI intervention should be evaluated in relation to these outcomes. The social work profession can increase research, policy, and direct service efforts in criminal legal reform by advocating for appropriate alternatives to incarceration for mothers.*

Keywords: *Alternatives to incarceration (ATI), mothers, minor children, mother-child community-based ATI*

Approximately 60% of all incarcerated women in the United States are mothers with minor children and most of them are single mothers (Glaze & Maruschak, 2009). Within jail systems, the number of incarcerated women who are mothers increases to nearly 80% (Swavola et al., 2016). Most incarcerated women have behavioral health issues as well as histories of trauma (Belknap, 2007; Covington & Bloom, 2007; Komarovskaya et al., 2011; Mears et al., 2012; Pimlott & Sarri, 2002; Steadman et al., 2009; Swavola et al., 2016). In addition to the strain of separation from her children, incarceration can cause a mother to lose employment, child-care options, and housing (La Vigne et al., 2008; Thompson & Newell, 2021). Upon reentry, mothers with a criminal record face a multitude of challenges to reintegrate into society and resume parenting (Garcia, 2016; Leverentz, 2014; Mitchell & Davis, 2019; Swavola et al., 2016).

Alternatives to incarceration (ATI) are any kind of punishment or treatment other than incarceration given to a person who commits a crime (Families Against Mandatory Minimum Sentencing, n.d.). The landscape of ATI in the United States is largely uncharted. There is significant diversity among what constitutes an ATI as well as differences in philosophies of governance and oversight (Skeem et al., 2006). Currently, no universal benchmarks exist for collecting and publishing data for purposes of evaluating ATI

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programs against common sets of performance measures such as cost-savings or reduced recidivism (Center for Health and Justice at TASC, 2013). There is also a lack of consensus on eligibility criteria for ATI (Patchin & Keveles, 2004) and on the most effective ATI for specialized populations such as pregnant/parenting women, juveniles, and people who commit violent crimes (Berman & Adler, 2018). Although there is some flexibility in how ATIs are implemented, typically they occur at four levels: 1) the law enforcement level, 2) the pretrial or prosecution level, 3) the specialty court level, and 4) the post-sentencing level (Center for Health and Justice at TASC, 2013). Common ATI include probation, treatment courts, electronic monitoring, and substance use rehabilitation (Center for Health and Justice at TASC, 2013). Berman and Adler (2018) report that ATI are less expensive than incarceration, focus on rehabilitation, and allow low-risk offenders to remain in the community as active citizens. It is important to note that ATI are not without challenges. Schenwar and Law (2020) note that many recent ATI efforts are grounded in control and confinement which mirror the prison structure they are meant to avoid.

Research is scarce on ATI for mothers in the U.S despite them being appropriate candidates due to their pathways into the criminal/legal system, treatment needs, and family circumstances (Kates, 2011; Shdaimah & Bailey-Kloch, 2014). Alternatives to incarceration (ATI) can be a viable option to hold women accountable for their crimes while maintaining their significant relationships and providing them with necessary rehabilitation (Goshin, 2015). The purpose of this study was to contribute to the current gap in literature on ATI for mothers and, importantly, to elevate the voices of mothers themselves. This study examined how mothers view the experiences of incarceration and ATI in terms of treatment for behavioral health issues, reentry into the community, and their relationship with their children.

Literature Review

Impact of Maternal Incarceration on Children

The literature regarding the effects of parental incarceration on children is vast (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2016; Arditti, 2012; Johnson & Easterling, 2012; Roberts, 2012; Turney, 2017; Wildeman, 2009; Wildeman et al., 2018). However, research exploring the specific impact that maternal incarceration has on children is much less common. Studies have found some children with an incarcerated mother have poor educational outcomes (Dallaire, 2007), antisocial behavior (Murray & Farrington, 2008), and higher rates of becoming incarcerated themselves (Phillips et al., 2007). Secondary data analysis from two separate studies using the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health found maternal incarceration to have damaging effects on children's overall well-being (Foster & Hagan, 2017; Hagan & Foster, 2012). Huebner and Gustafson (2007) found that children of incarcerated mothers were significantly more likely to be involved in the criminal legal system as adults. Trice and Brewster (2004) examined the impact of maternal incarceration on adolescent educational outcomes. Results indicated that children with an incarcerated mother were significantly more likely to have failing grades and higher rates of dropping out of school than the comparison group. Another study found that adults who had an incarcerated mother at any time in their life had significantly increased odds of

becoming incarcerated themselves (Burgess-Proctor et al., 2016).

Reintegration for Mothers and Children During Reentry

Most mothers are not incarcerated for a crime related to their parenting (Luke, 2002) and reunifying with their children is a main priority upon their release from prison or jail (Brown & Bloom, 2009; Robison & Hughes Miller, 2016). Many mothers report looking forward to resuming the parental role (Bachman et al., 2016; Ferraro & Moe, 2003; Vandermause et al., 2013), but state they were not prepared for how challenging this can be (Brown & Bloom, 2009; Gurusami, 2019). Arditti and Few (2006) interviewed mothers (n=28) who were reentering society; every mother reported that their incarceration put a significant strain on their children and family. They also stated that reacclimating to the role of motherhood was more difficult than they expected. Similarly, Michalsen (2011) interviewed formerly incarcerated mothers (n=100) and found that many confirmed that the difficulties with parenting were more stressful than anticipated. Through qualitative interviews with women on parole, Opsal (2011) found that mothers struggled to reestablish relationships with their children and feel confident in their parenting role after separation due to incarceration. In addition to the challenges of adjusting to the role of parenting upon reentry, mothers have an additional stress of meeting demands of probation and parole which can directly impact their contact with their children and their custody status (Gurusami, 2019; Opsal, 2015; Robison & Hughes Miller, 2016). ATI strive to eliminate the challenges for mothers and children associated with incarceration and reentry.

Alternatives to Incarceration for Mothers

The most widely studied programs involving incarcerated mothers and their children are prison nurseries (Byrne, 2010; Byrne et al., 2012; Goshin & Byrne, 2009; Goshin et al., 2014) where infants reside with mothers in a segregated prison unit. In contrast to prison nurseries, advocates for ATI prefer that mothers remain in a community setting with their children rather than be imprisoned with them (Correctional Association of New York, Women in Prison Project, 2015; Rebecca Project for Human Rights, 2010; Women's Prison Association, 2022). Some incarcerated mothers themselves have advocated for ATI. Dworsky et al. (2020) interviewed 42 mothers in a Midwestern prison to learn about their parenting experiences while incarcerated. These mothers recommended "community-based alternatives to incarceration, including substance abuse treatment, that would allow them to maintain contact with their children and continue to play an active parenting role in their children's lives" (p. 19). Community-based correctional programs for mothers are not without challenges. Although they maintain the maternal/child connection, some still adhere to "prison-like rules" (Schenwar & Law, 2020, p. 120). Haney (2013) studied one such facility and found the strict punitive nature to be counterproductive to mothering.

Three studies were found that evaluated residential ATI for mothers. Lichtenwalter et al. (2010) evaluated the House of Healing, a residential ATI for mothers with mental health and/or substance use disorders in Pennsylvania. Logistic regression analysis concluded that the more children a mother had residing with her, the higher her likelihood of a successful discharge. Also, mothers who successfully completed the program were nearly seven times

less likely to recidivate compared to women who were unsuccessful in program completion.

Brennan (2007) conducted a process evaluation of the Summit House program in North Carolina, an 18-24 month residential ATI for mothers and their minor children. Brennan evaluated how the ATI operated and highlighted program strengths and weaknesses. The study also sought to examine how the ATI assisted mothers (n=44) in building competency in the relationships with their children. Results indicated the ATI preserved connections between mothers and their children, enhanced the mother-child bond, and taught parenting skills. Participants reported that they were motivated to participate in the voluntary ATI because unlike prison, they could live with their children.

Goshin (2015) conducted an ethnography of a residential ATI for women with minor children (state not identified), spending 8 months observing the mothers (n=8), children (n=12) and staff (n=1). Based on unstructured and semi-structured interviews with the mothers and children, Goshin found positive experiences such as staying together as a family, having their own space, and feeling safe. However, themes also emerged that mothers' mental health, parenting, and health needs were unmet. Lastly, staff reported that they were unprepared to manage the behavioral health issues of the women and were not equipped to provide parenting support. These studies indicate successes and areas of growth for ATI for parenting women and provide a foundation for future research.

The literature is clear that women and children suffer as a result of maternal incarceration. Alternative options that address the underlying causes of women's offending could be more effective than incarceration while allowing mothers to maintain connections with their children. Little is known about the experiences of mothers who participate in rehabilitative ATI programming in lieu of incarceration. The comparison between this type of intervention and incarceration for mothers is understudied. Knowledge of the reported benefits and challenges of an ATI compared to incarceration may assist in further developing ATI options that avoid becoming "prison lite" (Schenwar & Law, 2020, p. 140) and assist the field of social work in creating and implementing these programs. The research question guiding this exploratory study was: How does the ATI compare to any previous incarceration mothers experienced from their perspective?

Methods

The data from this study stem from a larger dissertation research study conducted with mothers participating in an ATI in Oklahoma (Sutherby, 2020). The ATI is a community-based, comprehensive intervention for mothers convicted of non-violent crimes, currently parenting minor children. The program is designed to support mothers facing incarceration by helping them recover from addiction and mental health issues, obtain employment, maintain parenting responsibilities, desist from future crime, and become financially stable (Agency Director, personal communication, March 28, 2019).

The program provides an array of evidence-based clinical models to address trauma, mental health, and substance misuse issues including, dialectical behavioral therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, and seeking safety (Clinical Program Director, personal

communication, July 2, 2019). Each participant works with a team consisting of a therapist, care coordinator, peer recovery support specialist, health and wellness coordinator, strengthening families coordinator, and probation officer.

The study's theoretical foundation is grounded in the pathways perspective (Belknap, 2007; Bloom et al., 2003; Chesney-Lind, 1997; Daly, 1994) and relational cultural theory (RCT; Miller, 1976, 2008). According to the pathways perspective, women involved in the criminal legal system have histories of poverty, mental illness, trauma, substance misuse, domestic violence, and abuse/neglect (Brennan et al., 2012; Cobbina, 2010; Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009; Wattanaporn & Holtfreter, 2014). Relational cultural theory posits that maintaining connections and relationships are a central concern to women (Emerson & Ramaswamy, 2015; Miller, 2008). Carceral settings are meant to keep the public safe from criminals (Covington & Bloom, 2007) and are not designed to meet the behavioral health and relational needs of women (Covington & Bloom, 2007).

The focus group method for data collection was chosen for this study based on several factors: the mothers having limited time for interviews due to daily programming, the reported preference of sharing among other mothers, and a long history as an effective data collection method (Cyr, 2016; Krueger & Casey, 2015; Macnaughten & Myers, 2004; Madriz, 2001; Morgan, 2019). Focus groups allowed these mothers to "tell their stories" in a safe, confidential environment with the understanding that their voices may assist in helping other women in similar situations (Liamputtong, 2011).

Prior to beginning the research study, the semi-structured interview questions (Braun & Clarke, 2013) were piloted (Bearman, 2019) with two mothers participating in an ATI and one woman recently released from jail. Interview questions included: "When a mother is facing incarceration, what do you think are some of her main needs?" "What are the pros and cons of an ATI option for women?" "How does the ATI compare to incarceration?"

A total of eight focus groups were conducted, averaging five participants and each lasting approximately 90 minutes. To enhance the accuracy of the data collection, each focus group was audiotaped, and field notes were taken by the researcher and an assistant. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities. The study was approved by the Social Sciences Institutional Review Board at Michigan State University. A purposive sampling site-based recruitment method was executed for this study (Patton, 2002). Mothers were offered a \$25.00 gift card for their research participation. The sample was comprised of mothers with minor children who have graduated from or are currently involved in programming at an ATI ($n=34$). Of the sample, 3 participants were graduates and 31 were current participants. At the time of the study, 45 mothers were enrolled in the program and 122 total graduates. Participants' ages ranged from 22-43 years, with a mean age of 32.2 years ($SD= 6.03$). More detailed participant demographics are included in Table 1.

Data Analysis

An exploratory thematic analysis was conducted (Braun & Clarke, 2013) and data were analyzed in partnership with a trained research assistant and in consultation with the researcher’s dissertation chair. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and a complete coding process occurred (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The initial stage used *in vivo* coding to prioritize and honor the participants’ voices (Charmaz, 2014). A pattern-based analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) was used to systematically identify and report the salient features of the data. Codes were analyzed and combined to form themes that have a “central organizing concept” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 224). Themes were further analyzed to answer the research question and consensus was reached on four themes that emerged from the data.

Results

“Incarceration is Not Rehabilitation”

The first theme that emerged from the data revolved around incarceration not being rehabilitative. All the mothers who participated in the focus groups had previously been in jail, prison, or both, so they had firsthand experience in how the ATI compared to incarceration. In every focus group, rehabilitation, namely in terms of addiction, was mentioned as a difference between incarceration and the ATI. Regarding assistance with substance use disorders, no participants reported receiving help while incarcerated and in fact, it was the opposite. Besides not offering alcohol or drug treatment or recovery meetings, a few participants stated that drugs were readily available in jail and prison.

In describing the main difference for choosing the ATI versus going to jail, one woman stated, “I would have probably continued using drugs and learned how to be a better

Table 1. Participant Demographics (n=34)

| Demographic | Mean |
|--------------------------------|--------------|
| Age in years | 32.2 |
| | <i>n (%)</i> |
| Gender (female) | 34 (100%) |
| Education | |
| Did not graduate high school | 8 (23.5%) |
| High School Diploma/GED | 11 (32.4%) |
| Some college | 13 (38.2%) |
| Graduated college | 2 (5.9%) |
| Race/Ethnicity | |
| African American/Black | 6 (17.6%) |
| American Indian/Alaskan Native | 4 (11.8%) |
| Caucasian/White | 16 (47.1%) |
| Latino/Hispanic | 1 (2.9%) |
| Multiracial | 7 (20.6%) |
| Income | |
| < \$5,000 | 21 (61.8%) |
| \$ 5,000 - \$19,000 | 8 (23.5%) |
| \$ 20,000 - \$29,000 | 1 (2.9%) |
| \$ 30,000 - \$39,000 | 3 (8.8%) |
| \$ 50,000 - \$59,000 | 1 (2.9%) |
| Employment | |
| Full-time | 9 (27.3%) |
| Part-time | 9 (27.3%) |
| Not employed | 15 (45.5%) |
| Relationship status | |
| Married | 2 (5.9%) |
| Dating | 4 (11.8%) |
| Single | 27 (79.4%) |
| Number of minor children | |
| 1 | 7 (20.6%) |
| 2 | 9 (26.5%) |
| 3 | 11 (32.4%) |
| 4 | 4 (11.8%) |
| 5 or more | 3 (8.8%) |
| Minor child age | |
| <1 | 5 (5.5%) |
| 1-5 | 28 (30.8%) |
| 6-10 | 34 (37.4%) |
| 11-17 | 24 (26.4%) |

criminal.” Similarly, a participant talking about her experience in prison said, “It’s like so easy to do drugs, might as well do drugs because there’s nothing else to do.” One mother shared that she sold and used drugs while in prison and described her time as “a big party, because behind the walls you’re not really worried about the outside.” A participant who had been in several jails and spent “a lot of time” in prison claimed that therapeutic groups and education classes were rare and when someone participated, it was for the “wrong reason.” She explained that sentences can be reduced for attending group therapy or a GED class “but they’re not doing it to make better choices, they’re doing it so they can get out of jail faster. So, it’s just survival. It’s incarceration, not rehabilitation.” Similarly, in a different focus group two women shared the following exchange:

Lilac: The difference between rehabilitation and prison is like when you’re worried about not using and how you’re going to get your life together and what steps you need to take and um, like not staying at a standstill, while when you’re in prison, you’re at a standstill the whole time. You’re not learning any knowledge to keep you from going back to prison, you’re not getting resources for housing when you get out or getting resources for jobs when you get out, you know things like that. Instead you’re getting resources from other inmates.

Rose: Yeah, how to sell drugs or who their plug is, or who’s bringing their stuff in and, uh, when you get out, you can run sh-t for my uncle, or like, what you can do for me and what I can do for you and that’s it.

A mother shared her thoughts on prison not providing rehabilitative services:

[Prison] doesn’t teach them anything, actually causes them more trauma in there because of the things they have to do, like, um you know, or have to see or whatever because that’s prison life you know what I’m saying. You’ve been locked up, you have these felonies, a lot of people don’t even want to give you a chance and then when you...and then you get discouraged when you do go job-searching and they don’t call you and then it’s like what do you go back to? Selling drugs, doing whatever you gotta do to survive, then you get caught up in your addiction and then you catch another case and then you’re back in there.

When discussing this cycle of returning to incarceration one mother said, “They send us to lock us up in cages, and then you know we get back out. That’s not rehabilitating nobody.”

A few mothers claimed a strength of the ATI was the help they received throughout the program to be successful in the community. These women described leaving jail and prison as the same or worse than when they walked in, but when graduating from the ATI they were set up for success. One mother stated:

I know that if I were to have went into prison I would’ve came back out to the same lifestyle. I know that, most definitely, I would’ve gone back into my addiction. Just because the help that I really need, as far as mental help and substance abuse stuff [that] I want to get, you know, I wouldn’t have had that kind of help or the tools that I needed, um, like I do here.

Staff at the ATI were overwhelmingly described in a positive way such as “supportive” “kind”, “non-judgmental”, “trusting”, “caring”, “they have our back” and “our PO (probation officer) is awesome, she’s my number one.” Whereas the following exchange between two participants provides perspective on the attitude of corrections officers in prisons:

Lily: Guards don’t really look at you as a person. They look at you as a number and a criminal. Here they look at us as people.

Iris: Yeah, as somebody that can do better in life and make something out of themselves, as increasing their life.

Lily: When you’re incarcerated and stuff you can say all day what you need and what you want, and they’re gonna tell you “Oh well, you done messed up. You can’t get anything; you don’t deserve anything.”

“Incarceration is Easy, the Program is Hard”

The second theme is the concept that incarceration is easier than participating in the ATI. Many mothers reported that if a woman were motivated to change her life, she could be successful in the ATI. However, incarceration was less challenging and an option for women who were not ready to change. One woman shared that she interviewed for the ATI and decided not to enroll at the time because she was not ready to stop using drugs. After a subsequent arrest, she felt motivated to get her life together and entered the ATI. Some mothers described incarceration as time that they did not have to invest in themselves or “face their issues.” Some participants described incarceration as “dead time” where they were not concerned with finances, looking for a job, finding a place to live, or managing stress from the outside world. One participant explained incarceration this way:

Like, going to prison is really the easiest way. That’s easy. You can go sit, and do your time, and go to sleep, read a book, wake up, and do it again the next day. You know what I’m saying? Even with no money.

One mother said the ATI was challenging because “I have to deal with all the sh-t that got me here in the first place.” Another woman described how she was incarcerated several times for issues related to her addiction, but it was not until she participated in the ATI that she understood that her addiction stemmed from trauma. She thought about quitting the program many times because therapy was difficult and going back to jail “would have been easy.” However, she was committed to providing her children with “a better life” and said that she knew the ATI could assist her. One woman shared that she learned about the ATI from someone at court who told her not to participate because it was “so hard.” Some mothers discussed that while incarcerated they were not working towards a goal or taking active steps in improving their situation but in the ATI, they spent two years putting in effort. A few mothers discussed feeling exhausted from the “mental” work they did, which they said was not an expectation while incarcerated. There were comments in nearly every focus group regarding the environment of jail and prison being

violent. Despite this, several mothers said it was easier to do time than complete the ATI. One woman explained how incarceration became easier for her each time:

The longer...each time I got incarceration, it became easier and easier and easier and easier to me. So therefore, it's not even hard to me to lay in a jail cell. That's easy. I can do that all day long. Just lay there and look at the walls. That's nothing. When you actually have to train your mind to think a different way and learn how to act a different way and learn how to be a mother...because sitting in a jail cell, the day, the day you go in that jail cell you're...whatever day you come out you're still that same person as you were when you went into that jail, so you're not learning nothing.

“I’m Not the Same Person”

A third theme emerging from the data references the positive changes mothers made throughout their experience in the ATI helping change them into “different people.” One mother reported that the ATI “is life changing”; another said, “It’s changing my life, making a difference.” Several reasons were given throughout the focus groups for how this transformation occurs, including learning “new skills”, “thinking differently (not catastrophizing)”, “talking about feelings”, “communicating”, “learning to trust”, “getting sober”, and “setting healthy boundaries”. One mother reported that she now has routines and coping skills to keep her stable and another stated that she did not realize how much she had to learn before coming to the ATI. Another participant shared, “I’m a totally different person than the day when I walked in here.” During a dialogue regarding changes that mothers have seen in themselves while being at the ATI, one woman said, “Now, like I care about other people. Like it teaches you how to be the exact opposite of what you used to be.”

While comparing the ATI and being incarcerated, one graduate of the ATI stated, “nothing changed” when she returned home from incarceration in reference to her substance use and “toxic relationships.” When she left the ATI, she noted that she “stayed sober.” A few mothers said they went back to criminal legal involvement and strained relationships with children and family upon reentry from prison/jail. One of these mothers further shared that because she is a “different person” after ATI, her reentry experience will be more positive.

“Connection With Children”

The fourth theme related to how the ATI helped to improve the connection between mothers and their children. A few participants reported that while incarcerated, they had little to no contact with their children and the contact they did have was distressing. Some mothers said they did not have any phone calls, letters, or visits with their children while incarcerated in jail or prison. A few other women stated that whoever was caring for their children would not allow contact or in one case, there was a court order prohibiting contact between a mother and her child. A few mentioned that this was their choice because they did not want their children to visit them or have to explain where they were. One mother

said she lied and told her children she was going on vacation and others said they were working or going to school. A mother who was pregnant while in prison shares how she wished she could have been in the ATI throughout her pregnancy:

At least I would've been working towards seeing my kid and not sitting there in dead time. 'Cause being in prison is dead time and visits and letters are a big deal, you know what I mean? If you...if your kid isn't old enough to write you a letter, well those are just years you're missing. I get you're an addict, or, you know, I get all that. You know what I'm sayin'...but even the worst of the worst moms still deserves to see her baby.

A couple of mothers said that to have contact with children while incarcerated, they needed family who could afford to “put money on the books” so they could pay for phone calls or write letters. For instance, one of the graduates spoke with her children a few times a week while she was in jail because her mom regularly sent money. A few mothers who had older children said they enjoyed talking with them even sporadically, just to have some contact. However, a mother who had spent several years in prison regretted having her teenage children visit her because she felt like it was “selfish and traumatized them.”

When discussing contact and relationships with children during the ATI, many mothers expressed gratitude to the program for teaching them how to be better mothers. One woman said, “I wasn't the parent that I should have been and [the ATI] has helped me realize that, like it's okay to not know how to do it because we're going to help you through it.” Another mother credited the parenting education classes she took and the ability to talk through issues she was having with her children with staff. Many participants shared examples of how the ATI attempted to improve the mother/child connection. A mother captured this by stating that the ATI helps improve “connection with children.” One woman said that her teenage son was struggling with his own criminal legal issues and ATI staff helped her set healthy boundaries, process her feelings, and refer him to counseling services. Similarly, a single mom with no family shared that her son recently needed to have surgery and if she were in jail instead of the ATI, she would not have been able to sit with him at the hospital.

One mother described how she used to avoid her son when she was drinking so he would not see her intoxicated. Now she says they have a great relationship because she is sober with the help of the ATI. She further shared that she learned how to process the guilt she feels from abandoning him. Through tears, she exclaimed:

I don't dwell on how much I've missed out on because I know that he's got such a full life ahead of him that I get to be a part of, you know, and um, it's just, it's the best feeling ever to be able to...I'm his mom, you know.

Another mom said that the ATI “Taught me and my kids how to use our words so we get along good. I'm able to discipline them without spanking them or yelling at them and stuff like that.” Participants overall reported that their relationships with children were positively impacted through their involvement in the ATI.

Discussion

Studies of maternal incarceration (Allen et al., 2010; Barnes & Stringer, 2014; Enos, 2001; Ferraro & Moe, 2003) demonstrate the negative consequences that criminal legal confinement can have on mothers and their children. The current study supports this notion through mothers' accounts of fractured relationships with their children and continued substance use upon their reentry from jail and prison. The positive changes reported by this group of mothers due to their participation in an ATI intervention warrants further exploration into outcomes of ATI for mothers specific to their substance use and connections to children.

The data revealed an interesting paradox that is worthy of discussion. Participants made many references to the negative environment of jail and prison – how terrible the staff treated them, a lack of options for behavioral health treatment, and very limited contact with their children. However, one woman described prison as “a big party” and a few mothers said they could use drugs and get a break from reality while incarcerated. Several mothers reported that while they were incarcerated, they were isolated from the outside world, including responsibilities, so they said their time in jail/prison felt like a break. These findings are similar to women describing incarceration as a respite from their arduous life in the community (Douglas et al., 2009; Ferraro & Moe, 2003). Some study participants claimed that incarceration was traumatizing to them, which is supported by previous research (Green et al., 2016; Harner & Riley, 2013). A necessary survival mentality while incarcerated was mentioned by participants and the need to be on high alert, whereas claims were also made by some mothers that they could relax most of the day during their incarceration. Building off Bradley and Davon (2002), more research is needed to understand the way women interpret safety while incarcerated and how this may be connected to a trauma history.

The concept of incarceration being easier than the ATI may be centered on mothers' readiness for change and capacity to put in effort to rebuild their lives. A woman's state of mind while incarcerated may contribute to the lens she viewed the experience through (i.e., “those interested in assistance for addiction or reentry recognized the lack of services available to them.”) Women who were not considering treatment or their objective was simply to survive the experience may not feel as pessimistic. Participants did comment on the need to be motivated “to make it” in the ATI. Future research could study a mother's readiness for change and involvement with rehabilitative services during incarceration and when participating in an ATI. Mothers in this study attributed aspects of their success in the ATI to the support from staff. While many reported the challenges associated with rehabilitative work, they seemed to credit ATI staff with helping them manage this aspect. More information on how staff and ATI programming specifically support participants is needed to inform current and future ATI for mothers.

When discussing the differences between incarceration and the ATI, many mothers expressed that a significant difference was the contact they had with their children. While incarcerated, most mothers reported having no or limited contact with their children. A couple of participants stated they chose not to talk to or visit their children to “protect them,” while one mother shared that her guilt kept her from contacting her children. This

supports research findings that incarcerated mothers are sensitive to the possible harm visitation may cause their children, leading them to avoid contact (e.g., Casey-Acevedo & Bakken, 2002; Loper et al., 2009). Several mothers reported that the main reason they agreed to participate in the ATI was so that they could maintain contact or custody of their children. Brennan (2007) found similar results that mothers were motivated to participate in an ATI because they could live with their children, an option typically not available in prison.

Mothers in this study did not have consistent, meaningful contact with their children while they were incarcerated. On the contrary, they stated that the ATI preserves connections with their children and helps enhance their relationships. This study confirmed the findings of previous research that many mothers involved in the criminal legal system are devoted to maintaining relationships with their children (Arditti & Few, 2008; Brennan, 2007; Brown & Bloom, 2009; Ferraro & Moe, 2003; Goshin, 2015).

Implications

This study supports a broader understanding that the current practice of incarcerating mothers with minor children is not working. The American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare (AASWSW, 2016) and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, n.d.) have prioritized issues related to reducing incarceration. Further, the concept of smart decarceration remains a focus of the Grand Challenges of Social Work (Epperson & Pettus-Davis, 2017). However, mothers are not exclusively mentioned in these efforts. Social workers should embrace the notion that mothers in the criminal legal system are stigmatized (Corston, 2007; Sharp, 2014) and have been deemed among the most marginalized women in society (Aiello & McQueeney, 2016). The profession is grounded in helping vulnerable and oppressed people (NASW, 2017) and therefore social workers should take an active role in advocating for less harmful, more supportive alternatives to incarceration for mothers (O'Brien et al., 2019).

The current study fills a gap in the literature focusing on mothers participating in an ATI. Mothers described how their ATI experience compared to incarceration from a relational and treatment perspective. This is the first known study of its kind to hear from mothers directly about their experiences within a carceral setting and ATI regarding rehabilitation and connection to children. Mothers in other ATI programs may be interviewed using similar semi-structured questions to see if the findings are confirmed. Additionally, only three of the 122 ATI graduates participated in the study. A future study interviewing more graduates of the ATI could provide data on how mothers fare in the community without the hands-on support they received while in the program.

Limitations

While this study contributes to the understanding of previously incarcerated mothers participating in an ATI, there are some limitations to this research. First, the sampling was nonrandomized, and the study design does not have a control or comparison group. However, a thematic analysis study design and focus group data collection are appropriate

for an exploratory study (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Morgan, 2019). Further, the inclusion of a purposive sample of the women that participated in an ATI intervention makes it more likely that their authentic experiences were shared. The research participants were primarily Caucasian women. Studies involving women of color and ATI are needed, including the likelihood that they are offered ATI and reasons they may decline the option. Also, interviews did not occur with women who disenrolled from the ATI. It is possible that their perceptions about incarceration and the ATI are different from the study participants and therefore these populations should be included in future qualitative research. The data collected from this study came from a group of mothers participating in one ATI in the United States. Additionally, due to variations of types of ATI, eligibility criteria and program-specific data cannot be generalized to all mothers enrolled in ATI programs. Nonetheless, the exploratory nature of the study could help inform future research studies that are larger and more rigorous. Despite these noted limitations, the present study elevated the voices of mothers themselves regarding their perspectives of incarceration versus ATI participation. Insight was gained about some of the strengths and challenges of each which may help the development of current and future ATI for mothers.

Conclusion

Mothers in the criminal legal system are uniquely marginalized due to their pathways into crime, the stigma of being a bad mother, and the social consequences of having a criminal record. These mothers are generally not a risk to public safety and their incarceration can be counterproductive to both themselves and their children. They need interventions for underlying issues related to criminal offenses without separation from employment, housing, and relational supports. We recommend that the criminal legal system move away from the historical approach to crime and punishment and towards a more rehabilitative, restorative, and holistic approach for mothers. The social work profession can increase research, policy and direct service efforts in criminal legal reform by advocating for appropriate alternatives to incarceration for this marginalized population.

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