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**Steven Kohm, Kevin Walby, Kelly Gorkoff, Katharina Maier, Alex Tepperman, Bronwyn Dobchuk-Land, and Amelia Curran**
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# Representations of Transgression, Gender, and Redemption in *Girls Incarcerated: Young and Locked Up* and *College Behind Bars*

Crystal Gumieny (North Dakota and Minnesota state bars)
and Kevin Walby (University of Winnipeg)

## Abstract

Media scholars as well as cultural criminologists have long pointed to television and film representations of incarceration as vital in shaping public views of criminal justice practices. Drawing from the literature on media representations of incarceration, we examine *College Behind Bars* and *Girls Incarcerated: Young and Locked Up* to assess the patterns and themes that appear. We focus on issues of transgression, regression, stereotypes, gender, trauma, coping, support, and redemption. By assessing these themes, we show that these television productions reproduce the tendency in fictional television and movie depictions of incarceration to emphasize stereotypes and reproduce myths about the criminal justice system and people held captive within it. While these shows foster consumption and commodification of the harms of the criminal justice system, we contend these TV programs also partially allow for the voice of women to emerge and their stories to be heard.

**Keywords:** representations; prison; redemption; reality TV; documentaries; voice; youth; gender

## Introduction

Media scholars, as well as cultural criminologists, point to television and film representations of incarceration as key in shaping public views of criminal justice practices. For example, Wilson and O'Sullivan (2004) demonstrate the power of images of incarceration and punishment by investigating representations of prison in film and television drama. Fictional representations are engaged in framing and lack accuracy (Yousman, 2009). This is also true for popular TV programs such as *Orange is the New Black* (Schwan, 2016; Belcher, 2016; Artt & Schwann, 2016). Another prominent genre of media is

reality television, which allows people to voyeuristically and vicariously consume all kinds of life experiences that differ from their own (Stiernstedt & Jakobsson, 2017; Lundy et al., 2008; Pitman, 2002). Though they create the semblance of a documentary, reality TV representations are framed and constructed. This means the shows present limited and distorted views of social reality. To watch a reality TV show is to consume an ideological vision of the world (Redden, 2017; Gilligan, 2013). Reality TV is fictionalized to the extent it is framed according to dominant ideologies (Nabi, 2007).

While reality TV shows do offer some biographical content, they are contrived and fantastical (Lundy et al., 2008; Doyle, 1998). Reality TV is often contrasted with documentaries for this reason, as documentaries are assumed to offer a more accurate and balanced perspective. Though documentaries attempt to be more accurate and biographical, documentary media are also subject to framing and even embellishment (Stubberud, 2015; Rodriguez, 2013). While some literature has examined reality TV show depictions of incarceration, no studies have focused on the TV programs *College Behind Bars* and *Girls Incarcerated: Young and Locked Up*. What is interesting about these two media products is that both shows straddle the line between reality TV and documentaries in ways deserving of scholarly analysis.

To examine the themes that appear in *College Behind Bars* and *Girls Incarcerated*, and to provide conceptual guidance, we draw from cultural criminology and feminist criminology. Cultural criminology critically examines how widely consumed forms of media, including film and television, depict transgression and the criminal justice apparatus (Phillips & Strobl, 2006; Sanders & Lyon, 1995). Such inquiries assess how criminal justice practices and spaces become commodified for public consumption (also see Page & Ouellette, 2020 from a media studies perspective). Feminist criminology focuses on the way gender is reproduced in criminal justice practices and depicted in popular culture (Irwin & Chesney-Lind, 2008; Chesney-Lind & Eliason, 2006; Cavender et al., 1999). *College Behind Bars* and *Girls Incarcerated* share something in common, as they both represent young women who are incarcerated. Drawing from literature on media representations of incarceration, we examine *College Be-*

*hind Bars* and *Girls Incarcerated* to assess the themes that appear, including transgression, regression, stereotypes, gender, trauma, coping, support, and redemption. Redemption is an important theme in this context as this focus on individual self-worth, merit, and correction has been indexed to neoliberal ideas of citizenship and entrepreneurialism (Butler et al., 2020; Applegate et al., 1997), a claim we return to in the analysis. Assessing these themes, we argue these television productions reproduce the tendency in fictional TV and movie depictions of incarceration to emphasize stereotypes and reproduce myths about crime and the criminal justice system. We also show that these TV programs provide some biographical context regarding the characters, allowing for the voice of those incarcerated to emerge and the nuances of their stories to be heard in a limited manner. In the conclusion, we suggest these productions still tend toward fostering consumption and commodification of the pains of incarceration, and that producers could do more to give voice to people who have experienced criminalization.

First, we review literature on representations of incarceration, in particular representations of women and gender in the criminal justice system. We then offer a note on research methods before engaging in our analysis. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of what these findings contribute to the literature on media representations of incarceration, as well as media representations of women and criminal justice.

## Literature Review and Conceptual Position

There is no shortage of works assessing the representation of women in carceral spaces. Recent contributions address the way that gender and sexuality intersect in television prison dramas. For instance, Jackson and Gordy (2018) examine media representations of women behind bars and the way that femininity and women's bodies are construed in carceral spaces. Buonanno (2017) looks at how prison dramas on television depict women involved in the criminal justice system as characterized by dangerous femininity. Schwan (2016) considers *Orange Is the New Black* and how themes of privilege and spectatorship are conveyed in that television series. Belcher (2016) argues that in addition to gender, race and ethnicity are important in fictionalized accounts of women in prison. Women in prison dramas

serve as a platform for portraying transgressive femininities that may fetishize women's bodies.

Critical literature on media examines how the tendency to focus on entertainment in these representations translates into reliance on stereotypes and tropes that can foster stigmatization of criminalized people (Crépault & Kilty, 2017; Scheuneman-Scott & Kilty, 2016). From a critical perspective, it is important to examine the framing that occurs in such representations and how this work of framing depicts criminalized people (Waid-Lindberg et al., 2016; Cecil, 2015; Greenhill & Kohm, 2010; Cecil & Leitner, 2009). The construction of gender in media representations tends to reify stereotypical views and hegemonic understandings of masculinity and femininity (Gorga, 2017; Scheuneman-Scott & Kilty, 2016). Women in prison tend to be treated as deviant, both sexually and emotionally (Ciasullo, 2008). Offering a critical cultural and feminist perspective, Cecil (2007) suggests it is necessary to go beyond stereotypes in media images of women in prison since such representations tend to over-sexualize women and associate criminalized women with aggressive sexuality. Similarly, Silverman and Ryalls (2016) look at the issue of stigma in *Orange Is the New Black* and how stigma and temporality are intertwined in the storylines of that series. Chesney-Lind and Eliason (2006) have argued that representations of women and criminal justice are stereotypical and tend to demonize already marginalized and subjugated young women. This limits the subject positions available to young women as the only options in media representations are to either be invisible or incorrigible.

There is also literature on the juxtaposition between media representations and the actual lives of criminalized women. The context of young women's lives and the intersection with criminal justice are often excluded from the frame in media representations. Irwin and Chesney-Lind (2008) claim that media representations of the violence of women and girls tend to associate it with hypersexuality or dangerous masculinity, and there is a need to go beyond or deconstruct such framing. These insights are built on Chesney-Lind's (1993) earlier work on how the violence of women in women's gangs tends to be looked at through a masculinist frame that is sexualizing and reductionist. Chesney-Lind (2001) argues that criminalized women and

girls especially do not have these kinds of perceptions and media representations may naturalize the way women are being criminalized and subject to incarceration.

Producers of media representations of young women and incarceration must be aware of this landscape of stereotypes and myths, and if working in a documentary or reality media genre attempt to overcome such stereotypes. This is easier said than done because as research on reality TV and criminal justice has shown, these media are still engaged in framing even when claiming to depict reality in a documentary manner. For instance, Doyle (1998) has written on reality TV programs and policing, revealing police-friendly forms of framing. Cecil and Leitner (2009) argued that *MSNBC Investigates Lockup* is constrained in its ability to depict the realities of incarceration despite working in a documentary genre. On-screen images can be misleading and can foster criminal justice stereotypes that are demeaning (Valverde, 2013). We also explore the idea that TV programs straddling the line between reality TV and documentaries can promote the voice and standpoint of criminalized young women and allow their stories to be heard, albeit in a limited manner. While reality TV shows are constructed media products, such media depictions could also be venues allowing criminalized women to communicate a sense of self in an authentic yet clearly limited, constrained way.

Finally, we draw from Page and Ouellette's (2020) notion of "prison-televisual complex" which focuses on how prisons and jails open up to television companies and reality TV shows and documentaries to extend their carceral reach. Spanning media studies and cultural studies, this approach focuses on how networks between penal and cultural industries prey upon commodified prisoner bodies. Page and Ouellette developed this concept to refer to network ties between criminal justice management and culture industry representatives. A focus on the prison-televisual complex reveals how connections between media and corrections aim toward commodification of the pains of imprisonment. Prisons and jails become places of the commodification of prisoner bodies, turning the exploitation of racialized and poor prisoners into commodities consumed by the public. To the extent that infotainment media legitimates these forms of control or softens public views of them, the prison-televisual complex extends

the biopolitical and control functions of prisons and jails (Page & Ouellette, 2020). Prisons and jails are part of the culture industry. The shows we examine draw from tropes regarding prisoners such as transgression, regression, stereotypes, gender, trauma, coping, support, and redemption, which operate to commodify prisoner bodies and voices, turning their stories into wares for public consumption. Even if they provide space for the voice of imprisoned people, the TV shows we examine are part of the prison-televisual complex, ramping up public consumption of prison and jail images and operations and legitimating the carceral by providing more palatable and less critical views of these social institutions.

## Methodological Approach

This paper examines two docuseries on Netflix depicting prison life. TV programs that offer an inside look at prison life, like *Lockup*,[1] create the sense that the line between fact and fiction is blurry (Cecil, 2009). We decided to examine *College Behind Bars* and *Girls Incarcerated* from a larger group of TV programs on incarceration in North America. Once again, *College Behind Bars* and *Girls Incarcerated* straddle the line between reality TV and documentaries. The producers refer to these shows as docuseries, however both resemble the style of reality TV programs in some ways. The larger sample included other TV programs such as *60 Days In, First and Last, Happy Jail, Inside the World's Toughest Prison*, and *Jailbirds*. We decided to focus on *College Behind Bars* and *Girls Incarcerated* as these TV programs are more directly comparable given the similarities in content and the thematic overlap. We examined every scene in each show and each season for both productions. We examined the interactions of characters in the scenes. Initial notes were taken by the lead author and then examined to determine themes. We engaged in open coding of the content to develop themes regarding transgression, regression, stereotypes, gender, trauma, coping, support, and redemption. We did not predetermine these themes in advance. We used qualitative content analysis to examine scenes and dialogue in the two programs. Qualitative content analysis can be more or less directed by theory (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), and our approach is

[1] A 2005 docuseries, part of the *Lockup* franchise on MSNBC, showcasing prisoners in jails across the US.

more inductive, meaning we coded material to inductively locate descriptive themes. When coding, the authors worked together to ensure consistency in interpretation of excerpts (Tracy, 2010). There is overlap between some themes. We also report on discursive tropes we discovered. For example, in scenes regarding redemption, there are discursive overtones of individual self-worth, entrepreneurialism, and merit. Our analysis is organized according to the themes we distil from our dataset.

*Sample*

*College Behind Bars* is a four-part documentary series, released in 2019, that follows prisoners from Eastern and Taconic Correctional facilities, located in New York state, as they navigate college while incarcerated. The Bard Prison Initiative (BPI) is known as one of the most effective prison-education programs in the United States. Located in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, Bard College is one of 130 colleges across the United States that offer college programming to the country's prison population. At the time of filming, 300 prisoners were enrolled in BPI attempting to earn college degrees. Many BPI participants are serving time for violent offences committed during their teen years, such as armed robbery and manslaughter.

Filmed over four years, *College Behind Bars* discusses one of the US's most pressing political issues, "the failure to provide meaningful rehabilitation for the over two million Americans living behind bars" (Botstein & Burns, 2019; PBS, 2019). Each 60-minute segment showcases the lived experiences of the students and their families through the transformative power of education. Viewers watch the students compete in debates against Ivy League schools such as Yale and Harvard. Despite all the accomplishments of the characters, viewers are reminded this is still prison; aggressive fights erupt, students are disciplined for lewd writings, and many face time in the Special Housing Unit (SHU), where they are placed on administrative detention or for disciplinary segregation, or terminated from the program altogether.

In 2018, Netflix released a two-season series, *Girls Incarcerated*, documenting the lives of young women incarcerated at juvenile detention facilities in Indiana throughout sixteen 45-minute episodes.

Season one of the series begins at the Madison Juvenile Correctional Facility, a maximum-security facility housing 170 young women "students." Despite the facility's recidivism success, the Madison Juvenile Correctional Facility closed its doors in 2017 due to a decrease in the number of young women admissions. The young women and staff, including Superintendent John Galipeau, who worked with juvenile delinquents for 20 years, were moved to LaPorte Juvenile Correctional Facility, where season two was filmed. While LaPorte is still a maximum-security facility, it only houses 62 young women.

The young women come from all walks of life, with offenses ranging from small-time drug possessions or breaking and entering, and more violent crimes such as armed robbery, aggravated assaults, and weapons charges. The youngest person featured in the series is 12 years old. Rather than being confined to the facility for a specified period of time, as in the adult penal system, the young women are sentenced to complete a program that includes education and mental health programming and substance abuse treatment. While the program has a high rate of success, some young women return while others cannot be released because they have no guardian(s) on the outside. Both seasons document the struggles the young women face both locked up and on the outside, their relationships with other prisoners, and the milestones celebrated behind bars such as graduations.

*College Behind Bars* and *Girls Incarcerated* focus on two stark realities. While *Girls Incarcerated* features a similar cast, a largely white group of teenage girls who are incarcerated in Indiana, *College Behind Bars* presents a more diverse picture of institutional life. The cast is made up of men and women, predominately from Black communities throughout New York state, illustrating their lived experiences of social inequities. *Girls Incarcerated* follows the stories of young women incarcerated in Indiana — a state according to United States census data that is one of the 10 least diverse states in the US (McCann, 2021). *College Behind Bars* is filmed in maximum- and medium-security facilities across New York state, a state with one of the top 10 highest diversity index scores in 2020 (US Census Bureau, 2021). Unlike the women of *College Behind Bars*, the young women of *Girls Incarcerated* only spend months living behind bars. The

length of time a person serves, particularly for the young women of *Girls Incarcerated*, does not diminish their carceral experiences. While our analysis focuses on representations of women and girls living behind bars, these series do feature two different levels of institutions — female juvenile detention centres versus adult prisons (housing both male and female populations) — highlighting the manifold issues experienced by those serving time in those particular environments.

## Data Analysis

### *Transgression*

Each series represented transgression. Transgression refers to the pushing or crossing of boundaries or the breaking of rules (Jenks, 2003). The theme of transgression occurred within the prison walls when prisoners defied commands or duties of the institution. Several episodes of *Girls Incarcerated* showcased this idea as many of the teens rebelled against authority and change within the facility. Throughout both seasons, numerous young women struggled with behavioural issues and often acted out. When transgression occurs, the young women are reminded that they are still in prison and must abide by a strict routine and the rules in place. Serious infractions often resulted in being sent to MAC (making a change), which is equivalent to solitary confinement in the adult system, or having their release dates extended. Behaviours that resulted in discipline included talking back to correctional staff, causing disturbances, and acts such as vandalizing washrooms. In one instance, Reyes, 15, who was a recommitment to LaPorte for violating parole conditions, sent a defamatory email from another student's account to the student's mother. As a result of this act, Reyes's 60-day review period was terminated, and she was placed in the MAC unit.

Many young women also opposed prison programming, especially Warden Galipeau's burgundy-shirt initiative. The incentive awards high-achieving students in both academics and conduct. Those who have their burgundy shirts are generally the students treated as leaders, showcasing the core values of the facility. Students who wear burgundy shirts know the privilege and responsibilities that the title carries, it is suggested. Initiatives such as the burgundy shirt often

cause disgruntlement for many young women. This results in outbursts like when McAtee, 17, does not achieve her burgundy shirt and becomes fed up with trying to be a good person, explaining "it is easier to be a bad girl." Other students, like Lakin, 16, were not motivated to achieve their burgundy shirt because school felt like a distraction.

The traditional correctional framework used by Galipeau and staff of rewarding and reprimanding incarcerated people is utilitarian. However, several studies have examined how the construction and enforcement of the prison environment affects prisoner behavioural patterns (Toman, 2017). It is well established that correctional authorities often reprimand prisoners with infractions for trivial conduct like swearing and talking back to guards (Vuolo & Kruttschnitt, 2008), actions that would not be illegal outside the institution. As we discuss below, these carceral practices are not only harmful but fail to adequately address the needs of women and girls who find themselves incarcerated.

*Regression*

The theme of regression — reverting to pre-incarceration conduct — was also prominent in *Girls Incarcerated*. Instead of the more common and clinical criminological notion of recidivism, we refer to regression as any sort of setback or detour in the life course (Zamble & Quinsey, 2001). As young women approached the end of their programming and their release date was in sight, many began to spiral. The young women express frustration on how little agency they have over their lives and futures, because once they leave the facility they are confronted with the realities and temptations of their former lifestyle. Even with their aspirations to be good and do good, the young women remark how outside they lack support or positive influences to ensure they stay on a path that keeps them from returning to prison. In one interview, Guerra, 17, tearfully explained to producers that she was not as excited to leave Madison as she thought she would be. The closer she got to her release date, the more pressure she felt to have a plan once she was released because everyone asked, "Do you have a plan?" She went on to tell producers that once released, she wanted to do right but lacks a plan. All the girls discuss a similar fear. While their fears are not unwarranted, both shows miss an opportuni-

ty to discuss incarceration as a source of social harm, forfeiting a deeper encounter with educational content. As a result of abolitionist organizing, there has been growing awareness that prisons inflict widespread violations of human rights (Davis, 2011). Furthermore, because many prisons are primarily designed and operated by men, the needs of criminalized women are overlooked (Britton, 2003).

Regression continued outside the facility when those released were confronted with the realities of the streets. Students like Aberegg, 18, who grappled with confronting the consequences of her past while at LaPorte, reverted to old habits once released. With aspirations to stay clean, go to college, and get a job, Aberegg struggled with sobriety on the outside and overdosed just weeks after her release. In a follow-up with producers, Aberegg — who was filmed while high — claimed her most recent overdose was different because she realized she does not want to live the life of an addict anymore. Beyond the problematic ethics of depicting someone as inebriated on television, this scene is unsettling. Filming Aberegg in this state of mind speaks to the extent producers will go to portray and capitalize on the regression theme. It is this type of filming that represents the potential harms of prison media. It demonstrates how far cultural industries will go to not only commodify the suffering of those who have lived through incarceration but ensure that dominant ideologies about those incarcerated continue to be conveyed. This scene also speaks to the inability of prisons to address the underlying traumas that bring people in contact with the criminal justice system in the first place.

Regression was not a recognized theme in *College Behind Bars*. Given the requirements and rigor of attending university in prison, this is no surprise because all BPI students recognize what is at stake when they defy the authority of the institution — losing their seat at BPI. However, BPI students experience a disconnect between the stringent requirements of the institution and the openness of the college.

People outside prison walls largely view individuals in prison as undeserving of the tools needed for success, like a college education, where they are enabled with the skills to obtain employment and contribute to society upon release (Barker & Booth, 2016). One BPI student notes despite all the progress she has made behind bars, talking with family and friends is difficult because they expect her to slip

back into her "old role." Nonetheless, *College Behind Bars* depicts the characters as ambiguous or failing neoliberal subjects (Redden, 2017) who continue to transgress and regress despite opportunity. Neoliberal understandings of transgression and punishment are indexed to redemption, and lack of redemption is viewed as a failure to become a restored, entrepreneurial citizen (Butler et al., 2020). To quote Graham, 36, "I am expected to overcome things because everyone else is able to overcome them."

*Navigating Stereotypes*

There has been an abundance of research on public perceptions of various areas of the criminal justice system, particularly regarding public attitudes on prison and corrections (e.g., Purcel, 2020). The idea of rehabilitative programs, notably higher education in prison, has generated public debate. Studies have revealed that the public favours punishment but also believes rehabilitation should be a primary goal emphasized in corrections (Butler et al., 2020). The transformation of American public opinion on punishment policy is related to the rise in mass incarceration and changes in understanding of social inequality (National Research Council, 2014). Despite these findings, as conveyed in *College Behind Bars,* most US citizens believe that prison is meant for punishment, not an opportunity to be rewarded with the benefits provided by higher education (Botstein & Burns, 2019). Some parents in the docuseries share these stereotypical sentiments. One BPI mother explains having to be pushed by another daughter to visit her daughter in jail because it would make serving her time better, exclaiming if one wanted to make better time then she should have "never [gone] to jail."

According to figures provided by the series, in the United States, an estimated $80 billion a year is spent to keep individuals locked behind bars. To many in the US, the idea of providing prisoners with an opportunity to pursue higher education in prisons sends the wrong message. What people often neglect to understand is that the majority of prisoners will be released. This idea is highlighted throughout the *College Behind Bars* series. One scene depicting this is when Graham's mom comes to visit and refuses to attend her daughter's graduation. The mother and daughter are caught on camera arguing that Graham should not be rewarded behind bars, "getting a free diploma

when I have to pay for my other kids to go to school." Her mother states she "may as well go and commit a crime, do two years, and get a degree." Upset, Graham — like many inside students — is not surprised by how her mother thinks, as this is a common view. Navigating this sentiment, Graham suggests that when someone is in prison, they have opportunities to learn from their mistakes.

Over 300 BPI students have been released from custody. Navigating a world outside custody creates barriers for any former prisoner. BPI encourages transparency in their students, to expect to be questioned about their incarceration. Students face setbacks due to their incarceration because education alone cannot overcome spending 15 or more years behind bars. As one BPI student explains, people outside prison should want to have someone who did their time and worked toward an education inside as their neighbour.

*Gender and Identity*

Gender is a social structure that categorizes and classifies bodies and practices according to dominant typologies (e.g., masculine/feminine) (Connell, 2009). Since the time of Lombroso, there has always been a fascination with "bad girls" and the young woman prisoner. Mass media have long constructed the young woman prisoner as departing from traditional notions of femininity, as monsters or femme fatales — seductive woman who lure their predominately male victims into dangerous or compromising situations (Sandman, 2022). When women commit crime, particularly when it is violent, media headlines often "[rely] on simple cultural tropes and stereotypes — namely that women who commit acts of violence are either inherently mentally unstable … or innately bad" (Scheuneman-Scott & Kilty, 2016, p. 92). However, media reliance on gendered stereotypes overlooks the complexities that bring women into contact with the criminal justice system in the first place. Throughout both shows, it was clear many of the women and girls share something in common: a history of gendered trauma. As Montgomery, 25, shares, it was her experiences of abuse that landed her in jail. Young women prisoners bring unique experiences to incarceration, and thus, the construction of young women prisoners has shape-shifted during the last several decades (Sandman, 2022).

*Girls Incarcerated* represents young women prisoners. According to Purcel (2017), unlike male prisoners, young women prisoners have experienced high rates of sexual and physical abuse, mental illness, substance abuse, and child-rearing challenges — which are often linked to substance abuse and other criminal activity. Girls and women who become criminalized experience physical and sexual victimization prior to incarceration at a much higher rate than the general population (Purcel, 2017). Trauma and victimization continue for many women while incarcerated. Because young women prisoners experience these issues, treatment should acknowledge their distinct characteristics and needs.

*Girls Incarcerated* portrays the young women as human beings with intelligence, fears, hopes, and anxieties. Despite the rehabilitative and therapeutic ideologies employed by the facilities, the juvenile justice system is not equipped to address the trauma experienced by young women prisoners. *Girls Incarcerated* unveils the intergenerational cycles of violence, abuse, addiction, and neglect experienced by the young women entangled in the criminal justice system. Many of the young women faced gendered harms long before ever being incarcerated. Some ran away and turned to the streets to escape their home lives, while others coped with abuse using drugs and alcohol. Many describe these experiences beginning well before their pre-teen years. As the warden explains, a high percentage of the young women who enter the facility have long histories of emotional trauma and physical abuse. Throughout the series, many of the young women opened up to producers about their histories of gendered trauma, disclosing their experiences of abuse and struggles with self-harm.

The unique challenges young women face behind bars becomes emphasized when the BPI students study the novel *Emma* by Jane Austen. The women discuss the power of Jane Austen and her writing, and how narratives such as those in *Emma* push against social norms because in a time when women were not supposed to have a voice Austen provides one. One student goes on to explain how she looks at life differently — over time she has come to realize she is deserving of worth. Throughout both *College Behind Bars* and *Girls Incarcerated,* the women discuss having a life before incarceration in which they felt powerless. In another scene, a student can be seen

rapping to her classmates, discussing a past riddled with being a people pleaser, never feeling like they were good enough, pretending to be a proud and happy mother but feeling like a failure. As Cecil (2015) argues, some documentary-style media productions on prisons are able to depict the nuances of incarcerated women's lives by addressing the complexities of navigating motherhood and femininity behind bars. Both shows shed light on some of these issues, with *College Behind Bars* discussing the pains of motherhood behind bars as many of the women had children being raised by others on the outside. *Girls Incarcerated* presented a different perspective on femininity as only one of the featured girls was a mom. Because this series was focused of young women, it showcased the struggles of "growing up" behind bars such as puberty, relationships, and bullying.

Upon its release in 2019, *College Behind Bars* received significant media attention, such as articles published by the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. This attention focused on the men in the show and their journeys toward rehabilitation. Yet, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of women incarcerated in recent decades (Sawyer & Wagner, 2022; Roberts, 2012). In the past decade, women have been the fastest-growing incarcerated population in the United States, making up nearly one-third of the US prison population though accounting for only 4% of the prison population globally (American Civil Liberties Union, 2022). This increase is attributable to the widespread criminalization of women for non-violent offences. These trends are seen in the stories told by the young girls of *Girls Incarcerated*. Truancy, fighting, petty thefts, and user-quantity possession are among the several non-violent and misdemeanor crimes for which the girls find themselves sentenced to the juvenile detention centre. Adult women find themselves "frequently sanctioned as accomplices or conspirators despite having minimal or no involvement or knowledge of illicit activities of their male counterparts" (Beall, 2018, p. 25). Whether an adult or juvenile female, "[w]omen's problematic or criminal behaviors are typically related to abusive, sexually exploitative, or traumatizing home life, [and] predominately enter the criminal justice system for non-violent offences" (Miazad, 2002, p. 13).

Like gender, race plays an important in role in the construction and

representation of criminalized women. However, while both series portray a similar cast — young, impoverished, predominately racialized women — the issue of race and its intersection within the girls' lives is overlooked throughout the *Girls Incarcerated* series. In the United States, Black and Hispanic women represent 46% of all incarcerated women (ACLU, 2022). While there does appear to be a "larger" cast of white females in the *Girls Incarcerated* series, the show is based out of Indiana, which is among one of the least diverse states in the US (McCann, 2021). Race never becomes a prevailing topic during either season of *Girls Incarcerated*. Rather, discussions regarding demographics most often revolved around growing up in poverty, having unstable home lives riddled with histories of emotional trauma, physical abuse, and violence beginning before their pre-teen years. This is a stark contrast to *College Behind Bars* where the women frequently discuss how their position in society — being racialized women — heavily influences their experiences of discrimination in the justice system.

*Trauma and Coping*

Much prison research examines how prepared prisoners are to return to life outside the institution, how they cope following release, and recidivism rates (Zamble & Quinsey, 2001). Being in prison, whether as a first-time prisoner or a career criminal, comes with many changes, notably a complete disconnect from the outside world. Prison is a whole new world to navigate, and prisoners face difficulty coping with their sentences, separation from loved ones, and the pains of learning how to survive in a prison environment.

"Researchers have largely found that victims of crimes often have offending histories," and that youth who are victimized often engage in delinquent behaviours such as truancy and drug use (Toman, 2017, p. 3). Similar trends are seen in the adult population. Most young women of *Girls Incarcerated* come from unstable home lives, with family disruptions such as addiction, violence, and child welfare involvement, creating histories of trauma. In season one, we learn Lakin was sexually assaulted at the age of 12, McAtee witnessed her boyfriend's murder, and Maxwell — who was first brought to Madison as a runaway — made national headlines when it was revealed her biological mother held her hostage and forcibly fed her heroin

and meth.

Throughout both seasons, the young women learn to cope with their emotions, like Aberegg, who struggles to deal with the scars left from her past, a lifestyle riddled with drugs and abuse. Despite completing her time at Madison, Arbergg finds herself back on the streets and again using drugs. Like Arbergg, many other young women find themselves fighting against a vicious cycle of crime, addiction, and abuse that has devastated their families for generations. This narrative is highlighted in 15-year-old Imel's story. Imel comes from a community that struggles with drugs and addiction, particularly methamphetamine. Imel describes growing up around a community suffering from generations of addiction, explaining it was no surprise that she found herself experimenting with drugs before the age of 10.

It is obvious from these young women's stories that it is difficult to navigate life outside. In one episode, Imel learns of her mom's recent incarceration, which sends her into a whirlwind of emotions. Imel opens up, explaining that her mom always preaches for her to do good, but then gets herself locked up for the very things Imel is involved in. On the other hand, Imel expresses how she can relate to her mom's struggle to get clean and not relapse. As the young women learn to navigate doing time, many share their fears of falling victim to the same habits that brought them through the prison doors. Similarly, these traumas permeate the lives of BPI students. Like the young women of *Girls Incarcerated*, a majority of the students from *College Behind Bars* found themselves growing up in prison — facing lengthy sentences at ages as young as 16.

In prison, everything a person once knew is taken from them. Families become an important element within corrections, providing numerous positive effects such as helping to maintain the family unit, enhance the well-being of those incarcerated, and facilitate post-release success (De Claire & Dixon, 2017). Families not only help those incarcerated stay in touch with the outside world but serve as a support throughout their sentences. One BPI student explains that family connection provides a reminder that their identity exists beyond these bars — that being a prisoner is just one label among the many they wear, many that are more important, like being someone's child, sibling, parent, and a college student. The idea of support, par-

ticularly family support, was prominent in the *College Behind Bars* series. In a review of studies regarding the effects of family visits, women and adolescents who were visited by family members while incarcerated had reduced depressive symptoms (De Claire & Dixon, 2017). Despite the numerous benefits of visiting loved ones behind bars, planning a trip can be a stressful and difficult process. *The Marshall Project* (a research and policy initiative in the USA focused on prison and jail conditions) in particular has helped to shed light on not only the distance families have to go to visit a loved one but the financial and racialized implications associated with jail visits. This idea is highlighted when Graham's mom visits her at Taconic Correctional Facility, which is located in Westchester County, New York — 56 miles away from Staten Island where she grew up. Graham's mom explains that she will not be able to make it to Graham's graduation because she cannot make two trips to the institution within such a short period of time.

While institutions have similar visitation services such as visitation hours, private family visits, children's centres in prison, and visitor hospitality houses, programming at Madison and LaPorte places an emphasis on family. The facility hosts a Family Day twice each year. Despite many of the young women's backstories and often tumultuous relationships with family members, Family Day shows the young women that they still have love and support on the outside. For those who do not have family attend, the staff recognizes the importance of ensuring those young women feel encouraged and supported.

Staff at both Madison and LaPorte approach correctional treatment through a stern yet supportive approach, providing the young women with care and validation on their journey inside the carceral system. What is different about the treatment and rehabilitation seen in *Girls Incarcerated* compared to *College Behind Bars* is the correctional staff and the type of support the young women receive while incarcerated. While programming is oriented toward providing the young women with a continuum of care (i.e., counselling, drug treatment, and education), staff are a crucial element in helping many of the girls succeed. The staff are well aware of each girl's story and her triggers. This is apparent when the staff discusses each girl, like Thomas, who requires more patience because of her young age.

Whether this dedication is truly real or one framed by producers, it is important to note that rehabilitation can often be a difficult struggle for girls as they enter a system focused on and controlled by men (Miazad, 2002). Staff often lack training that would sensitize them to the therapeutic needs of women, often re-victimizing girls once inside the facility walls, as staff emphasize correcting behavioural problems of girls (Miazad, 2002) rather than trying to heal in holistic or transformative manner.

*Redemption*

When prisoners enter an institution, it is intended to be a place of reform. At least rhetorically, correctional reform serves a utilitarian goal by providing opportunities for those incarcerated to facilitate growth and reduce recidivism. When programming is well designed and implemented effectively to address the needs of the populations it serves, prisoners can be more successful (e.g., Duwe, 2017). Discourses of desistance and redemption are conditioned by the correctional facility and associated personnel such as parole officials (see Stone et al., 2018; Maruna, 2016).

As discussed in *College Behind Bars*, when it comes to incarceration, the US public often neglects to understand that without an opportunity to improve themselves in prison, prisoners, once released, are not prepared for life outside of prison. According to the program producers, nearly half of all prisoners are re-incarcerated within three years of their release (Botstein & Burns, 2019). For some — like the young women at LaPorte and Madison — recommitment happens within months. However, as discussed in the *College Behind Bars* series, those who go through programming, like the BPI initiative, have a recidivism rate of 4% compared to 50% otherwise. When prisoners are provided with ample opportunities behind bars, such as higher education, they are better equipped when returning to their families and communities, reducing recidivism rates (Botstein & Burns, 2019).

Students pursuing a Bard degree explain they have taken advantage of all the opportunities given to them while incarcerated. Just because someone is in prison does not mean that they should be deprived of the tools needed for success, like a college education, where they are

enabled with the skills to obtain employment and contribute to society upon release. Despite being labelled criminals, they too can change. As one student's mom explains, she has observed growth and maturity in her daughter, something that would have never happened but for BPI. She goes on to state that every prisoner should have access to education while incarcerated and programs like BPI are what they need.

For many years, public and professional discourse supported punishment as the purpose of imprisonment (National Research Council, 2014). In one study, prison and jail staff often favoured punishment (Kifer et al., 2003). For institutions where staff were less supportive of rehabilitation, less programming was offered. Despite an individual's motivations to change, it can be difficult in an institution where opportunity can be thwarted by the people who run the facility and who are supposed to provide rehabilitation opportunities. At the same time, depictions of redemption in the shows reflect a particular ideological point of view, a neoliberal view of redemption to the extent that individual responsibility and entrepreneurialism is the main focus (Redden, 2017). *Girls Incarcerated* portrays the girls as human beings, but never attempts to question the efficacy of juvenile detention centers and their role in rehabilitating 'wayward teenage' girls. Throughout the series, producers attempt to demonstrate that places like Madison or LaPorte are aimed toward nurturing the girls into rehabilitation. However, it is clear that when the girls enter the doors, they are in an institution that still treats them as prisoners who need reformation.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Drawing from cultural and feminist criminologies, we have shown that *College Behind Bars* and *Girls Incarcerated* portray many representations of young women who are criminalized and incarcerated. In some ways, *College Behind Bars* and *Girls Incarcerated* reproduced the tendency discovered in previous literature for media representations of incarceration to communicate stereotypes regarding the criminal justice system and those detained within. These TV programs not only construct crime, harm, wrong-doing, and law in ways that shape public views of the justice system, but these media products construct gender too (Lizardi, 2010; Cavender et al., 1999). Media products

straddling the line between documentaries and reality TV still tend to reproduce stereotypes about their subjects. Obviously, the voices of incarcerated girls and women are constrained in this infotainment genre of television, while critics of imprisonment are muted. There is little explicit focus on race in these series. To this extent, even docuseries that allow space for the voice of represented subjects are part of what Page and Ouellette (2020) call the prison-televisual complex. The prison-televisual complex commodifies the bodies of prisoners for profit and turns the carceral space into one for public consumption. We have shown that *College Behind Bars* and *Girls Incarcerated* do allow for some voice of the characters to appear, and some context regarding their lives to be present, albeit in a limited way. Despite the framing that reproduces the stereotypes, there is a biographical and some educational framing that appears. To reference Chesney-Lind and Eliason (2006), women go from being invisible and incorrigible to having a presence and a life. In this vein, we have argued TV media depictions could be venues that allow criminalized young women to convey a sense of self in an authentic, yet limited and constrained manner. Compared to Mason (2003), who looked at how cinematic representations are saturated with stereotypes, some TV series on criminal justice practices may serve even an educational purpose. Media products straddling the line between documentaries and reality TV are perhaps providing a limited opportunity for the voices and standpoints of more criminalized people to be heard.

To elaborate on this point about voice, shortly after its release in 2018, *Time Magazine* sat down with the executive producer Sarah Botstein, director Lynn Novick, and a BPI student, Tatro, to discuss the *College Behind Bars* project. The students were initially worried about being portrayed through the conventional lens of prison reality TV. These concerns were alleviated when producers provided students with their project goals. Tatro said it became clear that Botstein and Novick wanted to provide viewers with a documentary about the stories of those being filmed, bringing their voices to the forefront. Botstein and Novick made a conscious effort to ensure that *College Behind Bars* was not a form of parachute journalism. The film crew took time to learn about the students and the program, "[spending] just as much time with [the prisoners] in prison without cameras as they did with them" (Carlisle, 2019). It was important for the creators

to understand who they were filming, and it was important that the creators engage with the students. Tatro stated that the students "had conversations about all types of things and spent a lot of time with [Botstein and Novick] and have gotten to know them and their families" during filming. Tatro even stated after being released from prison in 2017, "my first Thanksgiving out of prison [was] at Novick's house" (Carlisle, 2019). Botstein had hoped that the series would help viewers think about prison in a different light, not only bringing to the forefront the importance of education but how systemic issues of race and poverty intersect in fuelling a justice system that causes tremendous harm to humans. As Tatro further remarked, "I want people to acknowledge the amount of humanity and potential that we have locked away in [the US] and think about the ways in which we can make a more inclusive society for all."

With this context in mind, we offer two caveats regarding these representations of criminalized young women. First, there is literature from visual sociology that suggests documentaries are not always as authentic as is claimed (Stubberud, 2015; Rodriguez, 2013). Documentary media operates with its own frames, which can be limited despite progressive intentions. The other caveat is based on findings from Yousman (2013), who studied how ex-prisoners and ex-criminalized people respond to television representations of incarceration. Their predominant responses range from bewilderment and shock to anger and outrage, although some respondents thought the representations were at least partially accurate. What is interesting about Yousman's study is the involvement of previously incarcerated people in the knowledge-production process. The documentary and reality TV genres of media representing incarceration can only go so far in depicting the experiences of incarceration and the lives of criminalized people, and the potential harms of representing imprisonment in these ways remain (also see Redden, 2017). There are limits to documentary framing, as framing involves political choices about what information to include and exclude. As shown, there is little attention to race in either show. There is little focus on the politics of imprisonment in either show. There are limits regarding the extent to which the voice, standpoint, and context of characters in the stories can be included. These limits are shaped by the politics of the show producers and company owners, which go beyond the scope of our

analysis. More research on the political economy of the "prison-televisual complex" (Page & Ouellette, 2020) and how factors shape the framing techniques that appear in these media products is much needed.

Examining *College Behind Bars* and *Girls Incarcerated*, we have argued these TV programs exhibit a shift away from the purely stereotypical to something more documentary. This genre has its limits, including the inability to escape the framing process and the challenge of including voice. We have also contributed to literature on media representations of young women involved in the criminal justice system by showing that some stereotypical themes appear even in documentary media (Chesney-Lind & Eliason, 2006; Irwin & Chesney-Lind, 2008). If consuming representations of suffering is the goal, no level of participation by those people depicted will redeem these types of media productions. We hope that media producers will see the humanistic value in working toward a transformative approach to representation in which criminalized people are no longer simply the subject of such media but empowered to become producers and storytellers. With shows that straddle the line between reality TV and documentaries, such as those examined here, there must be ways that media producers can use their platform to empower people experiencing criminalization, to teach us all more about the pains of incarceration, rather than simply promote more voyeuristic consumption of the carceral.

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