

Precursors to Incarceration: Women's stories from the New River Valley Regional Jail

INTRODUCTION

Justice-involved women in the United States face substance use disorder (SUD), domestic violence (DV), and other factors as precursors to incarceration at concerning high rates. Gaps remain in existing literature with respect to how affected women perceive their experiences with these factors in relation to justice system involvement. We conducted a study at a rural Virginia jail to address some of these gaps.

METHODS AND FINDINGS

We conducted interviews with 15 incarcerated women about their histories with substance use, exposure to violence, and other experiences relevant to their justice involvement. We conducted a qualitative thematic analysis, and 12 themes were identified (Fig. 1). These findings are summarized in the accompanying booklet, including stories from each of the interviewed women. All women chose or were assigned a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations are included here to promote and guide action among interested parties. These recommendations can be used to mitigate youth exposure to DV and substance abuse and to help break harmful generational cycles. They also underscore the need for accessible and appropriate mental health and SUD treatment services in correctional and community settings to reduce incarcerations, relapses, and recidivism. Recommendations fall under the following categories:

Research and data: Increase the focus on research centered around gender-specific concerns faced by incarcerated women and support incarcerated women by providing opportunities to share their stories and prevent other women from experiencing similar circumstances.

"I feel like there should be more time and research invested into substance abuse and rehabilitation as opposed to being incarcerated."
– Callie

"... safe house for abused women because women die every day, and nobody realizes. People don't even realize what's going on behind closed doors. Because there are some big, mean men out there. And they can really put on a show."

– Maggie

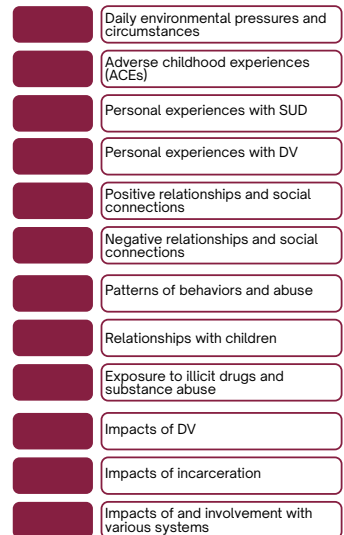


Figure 1: Study themes identified through thematic analysis

Primary prevention: Implement evidence-based programs and education to reduce youth exposure to DV and substance use and provide community-based preventative services to keep people out of jail.

Education of correctional and DV shelter staff: Implement trauma-informed education on risks faced by women who have experienced DV and/or substance abuse, provide jail staff with training to recognize trauma and SUD and to respond in a trauma-informed manner, and provide DV shelter staff with training to address the needs of previously incarcerated women with past trauma.

Alternatives to incarceration: Educate court systems to encourage women to partake in educational programs that address their unique experiences, implement recovery court and rehabilitation opportunities, and provide educational programs for at-risk women on topics such as handling trauma, life skills, professionalism, job training, and parenting.

“Some of these guards are not really sensitive to the fact that we have post-traumatic stress disorder...” – Callie

“I just feel like there should be more help with women that need mental health and substance abuse, and incarceration is definitely not the answer for a lot of us.” – Callie

Services in correctional settings: Implement trauma-informed and gender-specific counseling in carceral settings, incorporate programs into carceral settings to teach women health literacy, implement high-quality and accessible SUD treatment programs, and implement peer-support groups in carceral settings

“I mean, they need to get counselors that know what they're doing. They know what they're talking about, not what they've read. I mean, not everybody's the same. I mean, every case is different. Every person's different. They need to see that. The judges, the courts, need to see that every person is different. Don't just throw them all away because of a drug habit.” – Cate

Community-based services post-incarceration: Promote DV counseling support post-release, implement high-quality and accessible SUD treatment programs post-release, connect previously incarcerated individuals to mental health services upon release, provide women with a discharge manager to provide high-quality discharge resources that connect women with services, provide options for previously incarcerated individuals to obtain transitional housing that caters to those with previous trauma and/or SUD, provide assistance in job placement efforts, ensure that previously incarcerated individuals have access to comprehensive medical care post-release, and provide women with accessible transportation options during post-release transition

“I know that there's resources out there. You just have to be able to get to them and know where they are and who they are and know who to turn to.” – Daisy

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