The Prison Experience: Females
Chapter 8: Pages 187-205.

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The Agenda

- Examine the societal trends that are creating an increase for the female inmate population.
- Discuss the difficulties of confinement for female inmates within correctional institutions.
- Discuss the research findings in regard to the prevalence of female homosexuality within women’s prisons.

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Course: The Corrections Process
The Prison Experience: Females

- Prison for Women - The History: In the early days of prison history, women were confined in separate quarters in men’s prisons and, like men, suffered from filth, overcrowding, and harsh conditions (Pg. 188).
- Women lodged in the Auburn penitentiary in New York were subject to beatings and sexual abuse by the male guards.
- African American and poor women were disproportionately incarcerated in prisons all over the United States.
- Even before the end of slavery in 1865, Quaker abolitionists and suffragists were at the forefront of the prison reform movement.
- Elizabeth Fry of England helped organize the women confined in a London’s Newgate Prison in the early 1800s.
- Her brave and innovative work at Newgate Prison with incarcerated women was testimony to the fact that, with decent treatment, women convicts were redeemable.
- Fry challenged the rampant sexual abuse of institutionalized women and advocated that they be under the authority of other women and confined to their own institution.

- Fry also sought to substitute for the Quaker system of absolute silence a system that permitted inmates to communicate with each other and help each other reform (Pg. 188).
- Fry was able to instill hope and dignity in prisons and inmates where previously there had been only despair.
- Today Elizabeth Fry Societies in Canada play an active role in exposing abuses in women’s prisons.
- The Indiana Women’s Prison, the first separate prison for women, was founded by a Quaker couple in 1873 (it was also the first Maximum Security Facility for female prisoners in the United States).
- Four years later, Massachusetts built an all-female state reformatory.
- Another American Quaker helped found the progressive women’s reformatory at Bedford Hills and other states gradually followed and separate institutions for men and women became the norm.
- Characteristics of Women in Prison: Incarcerated women have typically had a troubled family life (Pg. 191).
- Significant numbers were at risk children, products of broken homes and the welfare system (grew up chronically poor).
- Over half have received welfare at some time during their adult lives.
The Prison Experience: Females

- As juveniles, former female inmates they experienced a pattern of harsh discipline and abuse (Pg. 191).
- Many claim to have been physically or sexually abused and this pattern continued in adult life; many female inmates were victims of domestic violence.
- The incarceration of so many women who are low-criminal risks yet face a high risk of exposure to HIV and other health issues because of their prior history of drug abuse and addiction presents a significant problem.
- One study of incarcerated women found that one-third of the sample reported that before their arrest they had traded sex for money or drugs; about one-quarter of these women reported trading sex for money or drugs “weekly or more often.”
- Such risky behavior significantly increases the likelihood of their carrying the AIDS virus or other sexually transmitted diseases.
- After a lifetime of emotional turmoil, physical and sexual abuse, and drug use, it seems improbable that overcrowded, underfunded correctional institutions can forge a dramatic turnaround in the behavior of at-risk female inmates.

Doing Time: The classic studies of women in prison found that prison culture for women was much different from that of men and revolved around sexual alliances with other female inmates (Pg. 192).
- However, more recent studies have found that severe overcrowding, scarcity of resources, and emphasis on correctional officer security now creates a much more austere and severe prison environment.
- As a result, women prisoners have a different response in some ways to imprisonment than was typically found in the past.
- Classic Studies: There are several classic studies of women in different prison settings such as Ward and Kassebaum and Rose.
- Ward and Kassebaum: In the 1965 study entitled “Women’s Prison: Sex and Social Structure” of the Frontera Correctional institution in California, David A. Ward and Gene Kassebaum found that women attempted to deal with the painful conditions of confinement by establishing homosexual alliances.
- The researchers describe these prison love affairs as appearing to be unstable, short lived, explosive, and involving strict differentiation between the prison sexual roles of “butch” and “femme.”
- Butch is a dominant, or male role while the femme is the docile or female role.
- The person in the butch role is expected to be strong, in control, and independent, and to pursue the femme (Gene Kassebaum, Dissertation Committee Chair, Department of Sociology at the University of Hawaii).
Giallombardo: Rose Giallombardo’s (1966) study of the federal reformatory for women in Alderson, West Virginia, indicated a major difference between male and female prisoners (Pg. 192).

Among female inmates, membership in fictive families was more common than participation in homosexual activities and occurred prior to sexual involvement.

Giallombardo reported that the women at Alderson established familiar relationships similar to the relationships of the free world.

A sort of family life with mothers and fathers, grandparents, and aunts’ and uncles was at the very center of inmate life at Alderson and provided a sense of belonging and identification that enabled inmates involved in “family affairs” to do easy time in prison.

Contemporary Prison Experience for Women: Several other contemporary studies continue to document the existence of same-sex relations in women’s prisons, but opinion today is that kinship networks are not as defined as earlier studies (Pg. 193).

In contrast, contemporary studies emphasize that social structure and relationships are only a small part of how women do their prison time.

Barbara Owen’s “In the Mix: Struggle and Survival in a Women’s Prison” is a study that took place at the Central California Women’s Facility, the world’s largest female correctional facility (Pg. 193).

The basic question of the study was: How do women prisoners do time?

(1) The culture in women’s prison is different from the degradation, violent, and predatory structure of male prison life because the culture of the female prison seeks to accommodate these struggles rather than to exploit them.

(2) The phase of a woman’s criminal record and the number of previous prison terms contribute greatly to the prison experience.

(3) Women prisoners, in comparing their imprisonment experiences to those of men prisoners, generally agreed that men show more solidarity than women (men fight less than women).

(4) Women are confined to administrative segregation for three major reasons: fighting, drug-related offenses, and assaults on staff.

(5) Three general categories of exploitative relationships took place: (a) begins with a nonpayment of a friendly loan of food or cigarettes, (b) pursues a relationship with a naive woman prisoner for exploitative purposes, (c) the outright extortion of weak inmate who is pressured to surrender her goods to another prisoner, either one time or as ongoing extortion.
Race tends to be de-emphasized much more than would be found in male prison culture and is not critical to female prison culture (Pg. 193).

(7) No formal gang culture exists (Pg. 194).

(8) Commitment to a criminal identity and stage in one’s criminal and prison career are the most important contributions to one’s style of “doing time” in prison.

(9) The female convict code has the following tenets: “Mind your own business,” “The police are not your friend: stay out of their face,” “If asked by staff, you do not tell,” “Do not allow rat-packing: fight one on one only,” and “Take care of each other.”

(10) In doing time, it is wise to stay out of “the mix,” which is any behavior that can bring trouble or conflict with correctional staff and other inmate prisoners (e.g., involvement in drugs or fights).

Mark Pogrebin and Mary Dodge’s interviews of former female inmates who had “done time” discovered an important element of prison life for many women was dealing with fear and violence (Women’s Accounts of Their Prison Experiences, 2001).

Some reported that violence in women’s prisons is common and that many female inmates undergo a process of prison socialization fraught with danger and volatile situations (some women in prison are violent, deadly and have killed before).

• Confinement for women may produce severe anxiety and anger because of separation from families and loved ones and the inability to function in normal female roles (Pg. 194).

Unlike men, who direct their anger outward, female prisoners may turn inward towards to more self-destructive acts to cope with their personal problems.

Female inmates are more likely than males to maim or disfigure themselves before attempting suicide.

One common practice among female inmates is self-mutilation, or carving.

This ranges from simple scratches to carving the name of their boyfriend on their body or even complex statements or sentences like “To mother, with hate.”

Note – not in the text: Male prison rape was designed to humiliate a male inmate by “turning him into a girl.” However, in female prison culture “rape” was used to destroy a woman’s “vanity” or “beauty.”

Beauty or good looks are powerful “tools” in the lower class that gain favors, money, protection, kindness, or sympathy from men and women.

Instead of an actual sexual assault, inmates attack a victim’s beauty such as scratching her face, burning her hair, “We’re gonna make you so ugly not even your pimp will take your ass back.”
Motherhood in Prison: An estimated 80,000 incarcerated women in state prisons and nearly sixty percent of women confined in federal prisons are parents to nearly 320,000 children under the age of eighteen (Pg. 196).

Furthermore, most of these women were the heads of single-parent households prior to their confinement (no father is present or involved in the children’s lives).

The separation of women prisoners from their children can be traumatic for all.

If no suitable family alternatives are available, children may be placed in foster homes or put up for adoption.

These types of placements make it very difficult for mothers to regain custody after release.

Imprisoned women are burdened with the knowledge that their own behavior has caused the separation from their children.

This separation generates feelings of emptiness, helplessness, guilt, anger, and bitterness, and fear of loss or rejection by the children.

With prolonged separation, mothers in prison fear their children might establish stronger bonds of affection with caretakers than with them.

Even more problems await inmates who are pregnant (Pg. 197).

The likelihood of pregnancy is high during imprisonment, with some prisoners sentenced to prison when they are already pregnant, and others becoming pregnant during home furloughs, work release, conjugal visits, or even from sexual intercourse or rape by prison staff.

Studies of pregnancy outcome among women prisoners have revealed high rates of perinatal mortality and morbidity (a male prison guard who had sex with a female inmate discovers she is pregnant).

The termination of prison pregnancy may not be possible even if the inmate desires it; under other circumstances the inmate may be forced by prison officials to have an abortion.

Programs for Incarcerated Mothers: Several states have innovative programs for mothers of young children.

California mandated the Mother-Infant-Care Program, an alternative sentencing project that allows one hundred women with infants who are six months old or younger to live in community-based facilities with their children and take parenting classes.

The program at Bedford Hills in New York State provides a nursery where babies up to eighteen months old can live with their mothers.
According to some prison wardens, the presence of children has a harmonizing effect on the entire prison population (Pg. 197).

The European Committee for Children of Imprisoned Parents (now Children of Prisoners Europe) advocates that attention be paid to the needs of children in maintaining ties with their incarcerated parents.

The Swedish Prison and Probation Service ordered the following for all prisons in Sweden:

1. Special leave will be granted for important events concerning a prisoner’s children.
2. Children should be allowed to telephone and speak directly to the parent (previously children could only leave a message and ask the parent to call back, which frequently occurred several hours later.)
3. Each new prisoner should be asked about his/her children.
4. Flexible visiting hours for children need to be provided.

Prison Nursery Programs: It is now estimated that four percent of women in state prisons and three percent of women in federal prisons were pregnant at the time of admittance (Pg. 198).

Additionally, about six percent of women in local jails were pregnant at the time of admittance.

Despite this trend of pregnant inmates, there is no national policy that dictates what happens to children born to mothers who are under correctional supervision (Pg. 198).

The overwhelming majority of children born to incarcerated mothers are separated from their mother’s immediately after birth and placed with relatives or into foster care.

In a handful of states, women have other options: prison nurseries and community-based residential parenting programs (might a woman get pregnant with the intent of getting a lighter prison sentence or even probation).

Prison nursery programs allow a mother to parent her infant for a limited period of time within a special housing unit at the prison.

Community-based residential parenting programs allow mothers to keep their infants with them while they fulfill their sentences in residential programs in the community.

In either case, most mothers have committed low-level nonviolent offenses, face relatively short sentences, and will continue as their children’s primary caregiver upon release.
When adequate resources are available for prison nursery programs, women who participate show lower rates of recidivism, and their children have shown no adverse effects as a result of their participation (Pg. 198).

By keeping mothers and infants together, these programs prevent foster care placement and allow for the formation of mother-child bonds during a critical period of infant development.

Most women in prison nursery programs have a much lower risk to correctional officers then when they don’t have their children.

Sexual Abuse: Feminists contend that all rape is an exercise of power, but some rapists have an edge that is more than physical; they operate within an institutionalized setting (Pg. 199).

One federal prison psychologist said was not uncommon for correctional officers to go into women’s cells and have sex.

Until recently, relatively little attention has been paid to the sexual assaults on female prisoners by their male guards (Pg. 200).

The International Women’s Day organization documented more than 1,000 cases of sexual abuse of prisoners by correctional staff in the United States (Pg. 200).

Extensive documentation was also provided by the Women’s Rights Project of Human Rights Watch, an international nongovernmental organization.


It revealed that the extent of correctional officer-on-inmate abuse behind the closed doors of prisons is staggering.

There continues to be extensive litigation concerning the sexual mistreatment of female inmates.

Prison sex scandals have erupted in California, Georgia, Hawaii, Ohio, Louisiana, Michigan, Tennessee, New York, and New Mexico.
Glossary - Key Terms:

**Butch:**
- The dominate, or male role, in a homosexual relationship in the female prison society (Pg. 363).

**Femme:**
- The docile, or female role, in a homosexual relationship in the female prison society (Pg. 364).

**Human Rights Watch:**
- An international nongovernmental organization that is concerned with the rights of individuals, such as prisoners (Pg. 365).