

Introduction easily,
the same cannot be
said



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Introduction

The correctional facilities offered by the Criminal Justice System are of immense importance for the effective running of the society. This is because it is through these avenues that those members of the society who do not abide by the laws and codes of conduct established can be punished and effectively rehabilitated. Even so, the United States has a phenomenal number of inmates serving in her state correctional facilities. While men traditionally make up the bulk of the inmates in US correctional facilities, women are the fastest growing group of incarcerated persons in US (Hutchinson 440). Women therefore make up a significant percentage of incarcerated persons and their unique needs and realities as they serve their terms has gained more prominence.

This paper shall set out to give an informative analysis on the issue of women in prison. The paper shall especially concentrate on the issues that are peculiar to women; abortion, Psychological functioning during Pregnancy and child birth. The paper shall also look at the alarming rates of suicides of women in prison and how women can best be reintegrated back to society after serving their sentences.

Issues Affecting Women in Prison

Incarcerated Women and Abortion

One of the rights that women have championed and gained in the 21st century is the right to access abortion services. While this are services that free women have access to fairly easily, the same cannot be said for women prisoners. This is a big issue considering the fact that 6-10% of women in custody at any particular time are pregnant (Sufrin, Creinin and Chang 6). <https://assignbuster.com/introduction-easily-the-same-cannot-be-said/>

While abortion is deemed a “reasonable, appropriate and constitutional measure” and it is the right of a woman to request for one regardless of her being incarcerated, research by the renowned political scientist Rachel Roth indicated that correctional facilities’ abortion policies are inconsistent and lack any form of standardization (Sufrin, Creinin and Chang 7). As a result of this, incarcerated women are faced with various barriers in their quest to obtain pregnancy termination. Research conducted by Sufrin, Creinin and Chang on the provision of abortion services for incarcerated women revealed that while majority of health care providers for incarcerated women asserted that abortion services were provided for prisoners, there was lack of well established procedures for arranging for such procedures (9). The lack of a written policy on prisoners who request abortion means that prisoners are at the mercy of prison officers who may deny their abortion requests at will. Women who request for elective abortions can therefore be denied by facilities which make distinctions between “medically necessary” and “elective abortions”. Abortion services for incarcerated women are also greatly dependent on the political trends of the particular state. Research indicated that states dominated by Republican legislatures were less likely to help imprisoned women obtain abortion as compared to states dominated by Democratic legislatures (Sufrin, Creinin and Chang 10).

This political influence on correctional health system is detrimental to prisoner’s who seek elective abortions. Denying women the right to an abortion is tantamount to violating the Eight Amendment which guarantees all prisoners the right to health care. Women’s right to choose for an abortion is guaranteed by the law regardless of incarceration.

Even so, the Abortion policies employed by some prisons greatly limit the prisoners' access to health care. Sufrin, Creinin and Chang propose that correctional health system should strive to come up with written policies on abortion that clearly articulate the pregnancy termination provisions available to the prisoners (10). This can help achieve quality service for the incarcerated women with positive outcomes.

Psychological functioning during Pregnancy

As a matter of fact, the pregnancy phase is an especially challenging period in a woman's life as she undergoes various physical and psychological changes. Considering the fact that an estimated 6-10% of women are pregnant as of the time when they are getting into prison, a significant number of women prisoners experience the various challenges that are inherent in pregnancy. A common condition experienced by the pregnant women is depression and anxiety. Research indicates that incarcerated mothers face more stressors than other inmates as a result of visitation concerns and separation from their families.

Pregnant inmates in particular stand the risk of elevated levels of anxiety and depression. This anxiety and depression experienced by the mother can have negative effects for infant development by increasing the infant's susceptibility to psychopathology. A reality that pregnant women in prison face is the impending separation from their newborns. Women who deliver while in prison spend about 1 or 2 days with their newborns after which the babies are taken away from them (Hutchinson et al.

441). Hutchinson et al. reveal that this separation and loss is “likely to be emotionally demanding and may even be a traumatic experience for many women” (441). This initial trauma may make it impossible for the mother to reconnect with their baby when they are reunited. This assertion is corroborated by a study by Sajaniemi et al. which revealed that the disruption in the initial bonding process of child and mother as a result of separation significantly affects the development of secure attachments.

In addition to this, the stress that comes from this separation may result in violent outbursts that result in the disciplinary action being taken against the incarcerated new mother. Pregnant incarcerated women are more predisposed to hostilities and angry outbursts as a result of their condition. While studies reveal that all pregnant women are likely to exhibit anger and hostility as a result of the hormonal changes they are undergoing, the hostile and angry reactions are higher in pregnant incarcerated women (Hutchinson et al. 441). This combined with situations such as lack of enough food for the mother and baby only serve to escalate tempers. This condition places the incarcerated women at great risk of interpersonal violence and infractions in prison. Such behaviors not only endanger the unborn child but they lead in disciplinary action being taken against the pregnant prisoner. In times of pregnancy and childbirth, social support is highlighted as one of the most important care practices.

While incarcerated pregnant women are surrounded by their peers in prison, research indicates that majority of them do not use their prison peers as a source of social support (Hutchinson et al. 447). Instead, the women mostly rely on their own mothers and/or the baby's fathers. However, incarcerated

women encounter significant barriers in their attempt to receive the much needed support. Incarceration results in limited visitation and access to telephones. Considering the fact that regular visits with children and maintenance of regular family relationships during incarceration significantly reduces the likelihood of the inmate reverting to crime after release, Hutchinson et al propose that correctional facilities should promote visitations (450). The women may also be imprisoned at facilities that are considerable distances from their homes therefore limiting the number of visits that their families' can afford.

In addition, many prisons do not allow family and friends during labor and delivery. This causes significant psychological distress to the pregnant women. After having their babies', women are required to make plans for placement of the infant's for the interim period between birth and the mother's release from the correctional facility. Hutchinson et al revealed that women who could not find a good potential caregiver expressed significant distress since the infant would have to be taken into the custody of the Department of Social Services and likely placed into foster care (447). Even the women who find potential caregivers problems related to the interim caregiver to whom they relinquish the care of their infants. The women experience a wide range of emotions ranging from jealousy, concern for child's well being to appreciation for the care provided to the child on their behalf. Hutchinson et al reveals that most of the interim caregivers are the inmates own mother and these results to concern if the mother has a history of neglectful or abusive parenting (442).

This results in the incarcerated mother having high levels of stress due to concern for their children.

Prisoners giving Birth

Approximately 1400 women give birth while under incarceration every year. This places them in a precarious position since giving birth even in the best of circumstances is an involving process. Incarcerated pregnant women face unique issues in addition to the issues that are common to mothers in general.

The unique issues mostly revolve around discomforts exacerbated by pregnancies and the stress brought about by the impending birth. Hutchinson proposes that correctional institutes establish specific interventions geared towards addressing the unique needs of pregnant inmates (450). A particularly novel support tool for women giving birth is the Birth Companions which was formed in 1996 with the primary aim of offering support for prisoners giving birth (Marshall 225). Birth Companions in essence provides experienced birth partners who offer support to women who are about to give birth. The Birth Companions visit the prison and offer birth plans for pregnant women as well as provide the much needed support during labor.

This assists reduce the anxiety that women in prison are predisposed to and assists the women focus on their babies'. Support during pregnancy results in positive experience by the pregnant inmates and research indicates that the support of an experienced birth companion significantly improves the outcomes for mother and baby. Marshall documents that in a study involving

over 1300 pregnant women, it was found that “ women who received continuous labor support were more likely to give birth virginally, needed less interventions, and had higher satisfaction rates and slightly shorter labors (225). Bearing in mind these positive results, it would be beneficial to have birth support services provided for every pregnant woman, incarcerated or not.

Suicides of women in Prison

Recent reports have called to attention the escalating rates of suicide among incarcerated women. Thomas documents that the suicide rate among female prisoners is a phenomenal 20times more common than among females in the general population. In any context, these are very troubling revelations and they point to a profound problems experienced by women in the correctional system. The first major problem that females encounter is despair.

While many female prisoners experience despair as a result of their incarceration, the prison environment is not conducive to an open express of this despair (Liebling 384). This is because of over-medicalization of the problem of suicide which results in hospitalization in cases of suspected suicide risk. Hospitalization results in segregation of the prisoner therefore leading to an escalation of the situation as a result of loneliness. As such, women who are at risk of suicide opt to keep their despair hidden instead of seeking help. Research indicates that younger women are especially at risk of attempting suicide than any other group due. The reasons for this include the fact that young inmates are susceptible to threats and attacks from others and generally have less resources and skills to avert such behaviors.

This bullying and victimization in young offenders results in higher likelihood of committing situation specific suicides by the young female prisoners.

Research by Liebling noted that prisoners who had committed suicide were more likely to have spent sometime in seclusion or protective custody while in the correctional facility (392). As such, being bullied and victimized by the other inmates is a common precursor to the prisoner attempting suicide.

Most of the women who commit in suicide have pre-existing issues with depression and these conditions are escalated as a result of the prison conditions. One study revealed that those who committed or attempted suicide were currently seeing the visiting psychiatrist or had a history of mental health issues before incarceration (Liebling 393). From these findings, it is clear that there is a link between the mental health of the prisoner and suicide rates. Liebling asserts that the significance of drug abuse in suicide prison remains as potent as every and particularly among the suicides that occur during the early periods of custody (384).

Research indicates that a significant number of female prisoners are incarcerated as a result of drug related offenses. Thomas articulates that more women are entering prison because of drug-related crimes and many of them are addict (353). While in prison, they lack access to their drugs of choice and hence experience withdrawals without the support facilities that they would have on the outside.

Social justice and women leaving prison

One of the core goals of correctional facilities is to rehabilitate people for successful reintegration into the society.

Fortune et al. state that while the goal of women's correction is for women to leave correctional institutes stronger than when they went in, the stigma associated with incarceration results in women returning to the communities feeling even more powerless (19). Being accepted back into the community or being rejected from it after release from prison has a major implication on a woman's ability to reintegrate.

Re-entry into community is mostly hampered by the stigma which results in offenders being perceived as bad. Stigma may result in the ex-convict isolating themselves from the community. This social isolation greatly reduces the opportunities for women to establish supportive relationships that are a prerequisite to post-prison empowerment. Social justice and shared responsibility are two of the principles which if effectively employed can assist in the effective reintegration of ex-convicted women into the society.

The principle of shared responsibility sees the entire society as being responsible for the creation and implementation of services for the incarcerated women (Fortune et al. 24). Dispelling the myths and negative perceptions about which are propagated by the media about incarcerated women, the negative connotation associated with ex-convicted women can be dispelled. By use of programs such as "Stride Night" which provide a platform for interaction between incarcerated women and community volunteers, a better understanding is borne and the volunteers can help dispel the stigma associated with incarcerated women (Fortune et al. 25). Brown and Stuart confirm that mentoring has become a popular and effective tool for reintegrating and resettling ex-prisoners. Mentoring offers

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the woman prisoner a nonjudgmental ear and a person who is not connected with the former criminal world that the ex-prisoner may have been involved in.

The first days following release, women are especially prone to falling back to old detrimental habits such as substance abuse, criminal activities and abusive relationships (Fortune et al. 23). By having a mentor, the former prisoner stands a better chance of leading a changed life. Brown and Stuart reveal that the value of mentors to the ex-convict mentee is great since mentors could act as character references for employment and housing for the ex-prisoners and even attend court for child custody hearings (42).

This social capital that the mentors can provide to the female ex-convict is of great importance since most women live in isolation after being released from prison either in an attempt to make a clean start from their turbulent past or due to issues of personal safety.

Discussion and Conclusion

Correctional facilities are a necessary aspect for the administrative component of a country to function efficiently. From this paper, it is clear that there are a number of major issues that women prisoners face during incarceration.

These issues have a negative impact on the women and decrease the likelihood of them. Marshall reports that the health issues of women have been overlooked by the correctional system which was designed primarily for men (227). This is especially true when dealing with pregnancy of inmates.

As it currently stands, handling of pregnant women in prison varies from

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prison to prison. For example, while shackling of pregnant incarcerated women is generally condemned, only six states have laws expressly condemning the practice (National NOW Times). As such, prisons in the states which do not have explicit laws against this practice can engage in this practice without fear of legal redress.

There have been calls for the establishment of a set standard for how pregnant women should be treated during pregnancy and birth in all prisons. As has been noted, conditions such as overcrowding, a lack of access to medical care and increased assault against the prisoner exacerbate problems that result in suicide risks among the inmates. The prison administration can therefore alleviate suicide rates by improving the living conditions of the inmates. In addition to this, protection of younger prisoners from victimization and bullying can reduce the amount of distress they experience therefore reducing their risk of committing suicide. The ultimate goal of correctional facilities is to mold convicts for future reintegration into the society. Through social justice and mentoring programs, ex-convicts can be successful reintegrated into society and allowed to make a meaningful living and consequently play a part in the noble task of building the nation. By accepting the ex-prisoner women into the community, the society will demonstrate its faith in the rehabilitative property of the prison systems and absolve the ex-felon since they have already repaid their debt to society by serving time.

While the role played by the criminal justice system is imperative for the well being of the society, the human rights of the prisoner must be respected and conditions made as humane as possible. As it currently stands, incarcerated

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women's access to abortion services is not guaranteed and support during pregnancy is inadequate. Women are also susceptible to suicide and psychological trauma in pregnancy. Correctional service institutes must strive to address these problems so as to make women's stay at prisons less traumatic.

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