

Increase of women population in prison essay

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Women in Prison Introduction The growing rate of women in prison has spawned widespread awareness in our society; leading people to question why the percentage multiplied exponentially over the past three decades. In the past, female offenders have not only been compared to their male counterparts, but to society's view on the role of women; the roles that labeled them as housewives and mothers. But how did these housewives and mothers go from the home to the prisons? The subject of women's issues has sporadically been discussed in our society, and it has just recently being uncovered that women operate differently than men in situations; and those differences are now starting to effect the growth rate in the population of women in prisons. The mission statement of the Federal Bureau of Prisons states that it "...protects society by confining offenders in the controlled environments of prisons and community-based facilities that are safe, humane, and appropriately secure, and which provide work and other self-improvement opportunities to assist offenders in becoming law-abiding citizens. This mission statement is similar to state prison mission statements written back in the late 1700's when male offenders were the ones majority of people were referring to since the number of female offenders was insignificant; so insignificant that there was no differential treatment between the two. Now that the number of female offenders has grown exponentially there are not only different treatments between the two genders, but different facilities as well.

The first state prisons were founded in the end of 1700s and back then there was no need for different treatments of facilities for women because of the small population of women offenders in these prisons. Most of them held

fewer than 20, if any at all, so there was no need for separate institutions. As time progressed on the population of female offenders in prison grew at a slow rate and in the late 1800s to the 1970s the purpose of prisons shifted from punishment to rehabilitation.

This brought along with it the separation of male and female offenders due to different rehabilitation methods. And since the 1970s prisons have shifted back towards equal treatment, but maintain different facilities. Using this as a background, this paper is going to address the ever growing issue of the rise of the female population in prisons. It will also provide a detailed literature review regarding the rise in the female population of prisons in four wide-ranging objectives:

- To examine society's view on the role of women and how it has changed throughout the years.
- To examine how the population of women has increased throughout the years.
- To examine how the treatment of women in prisons has changed since the founding of it in 1790.
- To provide recommendations on how to maintain a lower population of women in prison.

The role of women in society Fifty years ago the average person would have said that the only roles a woman had in our society is that of a housewife and mother, my how things have changed since then. Criminology theorist John Hagan did a study on the average household in 1987, developing a spectrum of types of families. At the opposite ends of that spectrum were patriarchal and egalitarian families. The patriarchal family type was reason why the average person would have made those comments about a woman's role in our society since it was the most popular during that time. It

was the typical 'Leave it to Beaver' family where the father went off to work to provide for the family, very Ward Cleaver-esque, and the wife would stay at home and take care of the children and maintain the home.

That was a time in our society where parents played a big role in shaping their propensities; they were the power brokers in defining their children's gender roles. It was a time where little girls were given dolls and dressed in frilly pink dresses and trained to be proper young ladies and manage a household. When a woman's main goal in life was to get married and have children. It was a time when, according to Hagan's theory, sons were more likely to be deviant because they were not as restricted as their sisters.

The sons were allowed to stay out late, hang out with friends, and when their misdemeanors were fixed with the simple saying of "boys will be boys". With males having more freedom to commit delinquent acts, there was doubt that the men were the majority of the population of prisons. As time passed and women began to embrace their liberations, more and more of them began working outside the home.

This sudden rise of women in the workplace led to the shift in families. The number of egalitarian families in this nation began to increase, and with that women held more equal weight in household decisions with their husbands. A shift in the deviance of the children began to occur as well. Criminology theorists Matza and Sykes (1957) believe that anyone can be freed up to be delinquent and under this egalitarian household both boys and girls shared equal chances of doing just that, since there was starting to be a lack of supervision. When the parents did come home from work the women would

bring the equal opportunity mentality with them so daughters were not being as restricted as they were before. The rise in the population of women in prison “ The imprisonment boom that began in the late 1970s has swelled the state and federal prison system to more than 1.

4 million prisoners. Adding those held in local jails and other lockups (juvenile facilities, immigrant detention, etc.) the total number of people behind bars rises to almost 2. 3 million—of which seven percent are women” (Harrison and Beck, 2005). Though women make up a small portion of all the people serving time in prison their number is growing at a quicker rate than that of men. The population growth of females in state prisons has far surpassed male growth in the past twenty-five years.

The Bureau of Justice Statistics provides statistical data that reveal the rate of increase in the female population in prisons from 1977-2004. Some key findings on this report include:

- There was a growth of over 750% in the number of women serving sentences of more than a year, almost double the 388% increase that the men experienced.
- Although the size of the gap varies, female prison populations have risen more quickly than male populations in all 50 states, Montana having the highest growth rate of them all.
- Several other Mountain states also appear to be particularly tough on women. Idaho and Colorado rank among the top 10 on every scale of female imprisonment, including population growth over the last five years.

Oklahoma is one of six states where women make up at least 10 percent of the prison population, and Mississippi’s population has grown 28 times larger since 1977. Table 1 summarizes the rise in the population of female

offenders in United States prisons from 1980-2004. [pic] This higher growth rate can also be in correspondence to the increase in the number women arrested.

For instance, during the time between 1994 and 2004, the percentage of women arrested only rose by 13 percent, but the percentage of women behind bars grew by 53 percent. The imprisonment rates for women soared 36 percent over the same time period, while the percentage for men only rose 17 percent (Bureau of Justice Statistics). The question is; where are all these female offenders coming from? Who are all these women who are causing this spike in the rise of the prison population? The NIC has compiled a national profile of female offenders in their " Gender Responsive Strategies". It is a profile based on national data for women offenders reveals the following characteristics:

- Disproportionately women of color.

- In their early to mid-30s.
- Most likely to have been convicted of a drug-related offense. From fragmented families that include other family members who also have been involved with the criminal justice system.
- Survivors of physical and/or sexual abuse as children and adults.
- Individuals with significant substance abuse problems.

- Individuals with multiple physical and mental health problems.
- Unmarried mothers of minor children.
- Individuals with a high school or general equivalency diploma (GED) but limited vocational training and sporadic work histories. A lot of those characteristics seem to coincide with criminologist theories from the early 1900s, particularly Cesare Lombroso's *The Female Offender* (1920). In it he deals with crime as an atavism, survival of "

primitive” traits in individuals, especially in those of the female and nonwhite races. Lombroso theorized that people developed differently in sexual and racial restrictions which differ hierarchically from the “ most highly developed, the white men, to the most primitive, the nonwhite women”. He assumed that all criminals were atavistic and spent a lot time comparing body parts like heads, heights, weights, etc of convicted criminals and prostitutes to normal women. Any trait that he found more prevalent in criminals he deemed atavistic and stated that people with those traits were genetically criminals.

Some of these traits included dark skin, short heights, some pertaining directly to specific races and others to physical problems in general. Lombroso wasn't the only theorist who researched the topic female offenders; Kingsley Davis (1961), a theorist who did a study on prostitution determined that most of the women who had been arrested for working in that industry had also been sexually abused. W. I. Thomas (1907, 1923) stated that women turn to crime out of poverty and even Sigmund Freud (1933) said that women committed crimes due to a failed development of healthy attitudes. So the traits listed in that national profile from 2004 are traits that have been theorized and tested on long before it was comprised; and the profile still fits these theories decades later. Examining how the treatment of women in prisons has changed since their founding. The first state prisons were founded around 1790 and at the time the inmates they held were mostly men.

With the highest population of women in one being 10 or less, the states saw no need for separate institutions for them and often jailed women in cells next to men. There was also no special treatment towards women, they lived and worked in same harsh conditions the men did. From the outside looking in it looked like there was complete equality with the two genders, but that was not the case. There wasn't much privacy in the original prisons, and since there was no separation of the genders the female prisoners were often assaulted by guards and other males prisoners. Since most of the staff in the institution was males they showed favor to the male prisoners, ignoring, mistreating and abusing the female convicts as well, especially when it came to pregnancies. Pregnant female prisoners were forced to give birth by themselves in their cells in the founding prisons, and the lack of medical care led to many still-born babies and sick ones if they did survive. As time passed and the female population in prisons grew they were moved into separate quarters, but still in the same facilities. This helped with sexual abuse by male prisoners, but they were still treated differently by the personnel.

The rehabilitation era of 1870 brought change to the way prisoners were treated. It was believed they would assimilate better into society if they were rehabilitated and not just punished, so the prisons developed programs to do just that. Feminists in society started to push for separate treatment for women in prison compared to their male counterparts, and their actions worked, female prisoners received the separate treatment, but the feminists' plan backfired. Not only were women being treated differently in prisons, but in the courtroom as well. Harsher and unfair sentences were now being given

to women, longer sentences than those that would be given to men who committed the same crimes, and because of that backfire the population of female prisoners grew. It wasn't until the first female institution in Alderson, West Virginia was founded in 1927 that things began to change. The facility, developed by Mary Belle Harris, cost \$2.5 million to build was "14 cottages (segregated by race), each containing a kitchen and rooms for about 30 women, were built in a horseshoe pattern on two tiered slopes" (Heffernan, 1992).

It was after this prison opened that true equal treatment began to occur. Now that the women were in a separate facility than the men there were very few acts of sexual abuse and they were free to serve their time and fulfill their rehabilitation programs without having to worry about being harassed by male prisoners. The rehabilitation programs in these female facilities went from domestic training in the 1920's to being prepared for the workforce by the 1960's. It was then when true equality between female and male convicts came to be; equal sentence and treatment in prison was fought for and for the most part granted.

Conclusion and Recommendations Equality in current prisons for women is a huge step from the treatment they were receiving in the earlier ones, but now that that fear of being mistreated and abused is gone, more and more women are ok with being incarcerated. The "get tough on crime" movement skyrocketed the female population and it is only continuing to grow. With all these women in prison, who is there to take care of their children; their families? In 1999 there were about 721,500 parents in state and federal

prisons; about 55% in states and 63% in federal, and that was a decade ago. In cases like this, it's the children who miss out. They are the ones who either are raised by another family member or thrown into the system if there is no one able to care for them. People always want to hope for the best, but children in the system don't always receive the best treatment and have a better chance of being deviant and continuing that cycle of crime like their parents than children raised by their parents. My recommendation to relieve the problem of the ever-growing female population in prisons is to focus more on the rehabilitation and education programs in prison since most of the female inmates are repeat offenders. Increasing these drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs and education classes will help these women be prepared to better assimilate back into society.

Hopefully with these learned skills and loss of habits the population of women in prison will decrease. Also, instead of going straight to giving sentences of incarceration there could be more opportunities for the female convicts to make amends for their wrong doings through community service. This would keep petty drug charges and first time offenders of misdemeanors out of prison. These recommendations would not only lower the population of women behind bars, but if applied to men too it could lower the entire population of prisoners. References Bureau of Justice Statistics. Profile of state prison inmates — 1986.

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