

**Degradation, Apathy, and
Acceptable Casualties:
Serving Time in a Women's
Federal Correctional Institute**

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Abstract

Despite the dramatic increase in the number of women incarcerated in the United States, there is a significant gap in the literature detailing the female offender and her experiences being processed through the criminal justice machinery, her adaptation and survival within correctional institutes, and her reintegration into society. Concentrating specifically on the daily experiences of life in prison, this manuscript employs a convict perspective to examine the nature of incarcerating females. In addition to the information garnered from the prison literature, this paper utilizes personal accounts of the author (an ex-convict) and her interactions with prisoners to provide a critical look at life and culture hidden behind razor wire. Few people outside the prison walls know what goes on in prison; fewer still are motivated to address the issue. The demonization of the female convict is accepted by a misinformed public, perpetuated by an over-zealous media, promoted by self-serving political figures, and supported by a flawed criminal justice system. The threat these women are believed to possess represents a failure to acknowledge the damaging effects of even limited incarceration. There is very little practical understanding of the experiences and perspectives of women in prison, therefore, this description is offered to increase awareness, fill the scholarly void, and stimulate a more constructive discourse.

About the Author

Bernadette Olson is currently an assistant professor of criminal justice at Indiana University Southeast in New Albany. A graduate of Washington State University's Criminal Justice Program, Dr. Olson also holds a master's degree in criminal justice and a bachelor's degree in psychology. She teaches courses in criminal investigation/policing, criminology, and corrections. Professor Olson's areas of interest within the field are largely focused on serious, violent and chronic offenders, particularly those involving homicide and sexual assault. Her own involvement in the criminal justice system (she served 6 months in a federal correctional institute) has led to an additional research area that explores penal policies and practices; specifically the current nature of incarcerating female offenders, their largely unexplored experiences while in prison and the multi-faceted barriers they face when attempting to rebuild their lives following incarceration.

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Introduction – A Personal Statement

Throughout the process of researching and writing this paper, I found that I was often overcome with feelings of anxiety and frustration. There is so much information to be shared and so many details that deserve mentioning. Sifting through all that I had experienced in the last couple of years continued to be overwhelming for me, and as a result, I often wrote nothing. The struggle for me, as both an academic and an ex-convict, was deciding how best to describe and convey my journey through the criminal justice system, my experiences preparing for and serving time in a federal correctional institute, and the painful process of picking up the pieces and trying to blend productively back into a society that seems to resent my very presence. It would be particularly easy for me at this point to simply complain about what has happened to me, and all that I have been through, but I have come to believe that some larger good must come from my situation. If I succumb to my fears and hide in my shame, then all I have witnessed and all the suffering that continues to be endured by those women who remain warehoused as damaged goods, will have been in vain.

The difficulty for me was in knowing what topic(s) warranted primary attention, where to place my initial energies, and what details merited first consideration. My preliminary reaction was to focus this paper on me; the depth of my embarrassment seems limitless, and the hold this experience has on my conscience seems unbearable. I feel compelled to disclose the painful experiences of my family and my friends, the losses I have felt and the indignities I have been subjected to, and my own feelings of violation and the nightmares that continue today. But as I read through the notes and

journal entries I have maintained throughout this process, I have decided that I would first need to provide the reader with a look inside the hidden and convoluted world of government sanctioned punishment through the eyes of a woman who lived through it, and all those women who will continue to live it. Perhaps then, it will make more sense to examine notions of fairness and harm, compensation to victims and those who have been wronged, rehabilitation versus retribution, the justifications used to allow the suffering of others in the name of justice, and the objections of those who argue for harsher sentencing, expanded use of incarceration, and continued depravation of democratic memberships, rights and legitimate opportunities to those who have served their time and paid their ‘debt’ to society.

As I think back on my first days in prison, I wonder how to put into words such an extraordinary experience, knowing that at each step along the way, those in positions of authority will deny it and the voice of society will say “so what?” To many, we are trash; we are criminals, somehow less human and less worthy. Few will show us empathy; fewer still will offer to help. Discussing the pains of imprisonment against the backdrop of an apathetic government, an unconcerned and ever-expanding system, and a judgmental self-righteous public, makes this task that much more important. While I am fully committed in my efforts to demystify the private and often brutal world of incarceration, I have been “encouraged” by friends and colleagues in the legal profession to “tread lightly” with regards to specific issues of violation and abuse. It is clear that while I am still on paper (probation), I am subject to censorship, penalties, and potential retribution. Therefore, I will limit this paper to general observations, personal perspectives, and broad themes regarding my incarceration experience. It is unfortunate,

however, that this is the very secrecy that allows the misuse of power and authority, and perpetuates the grief, humiliation, loss, and degradation that impacts the everyday life of a convict.

I think it is important that the reader understands that as a nonviolent, first-time offender, I was originally sentenced to a “work camp.” Unfortunately, this facility was damaged in a hurricane, and I was subsequently designated to a federal correctional institute. I have spent a number of years both working and studying in a variety of criminal justice arenas, but despite my knowledge of the various processes and procedures, I was devastated and completely unprepared for what I experienced. The current treatment of those in prison reflects the views of society as a whole. The violence that takes place, the dismal medical and psychological care, the blatant abuse by staff and guards, the entirety of the efforts to break spirits and tear down the individual are tolerated and accepted (Terry, 2000). The very fact that we as convicts become accustomed to and even expect such practices and daily routines further reinforces the emotional and physical damage that occurs with even limited incarceration. To be sure, the damages of imprisonment go far beyond the physical, the lasting impact on our psyches and identities are devastating. The physical wounds heal, but the emotional scars will last a lifetime.

Why Would We Expect Anything Different?

The unprecedeted rise in incarceration over the past quarter of a century, as well as a shift in the overall demographic makeup of the United States prison population, has given rise to an exceedingly malevolent prison culture. Unyielding crime policies and Draconian sentencing laws have expanded the prison population at exorbitant and

unmanageable rates. Additionally, the War on Drugs has not only increased the size of our prison population, but also heavily skewed the population mix toward society's marginalized individuals and people of color. Arrests, convictions, and incarceration rates differ drastically among socio-economic sectors and racial groups in the United States. The vast majority of those in the criminal justice system were either impoverished or among the working poor at the time of their arrest (U.S. Department of Labor, 2002).

As crime policies have become more severe, unhallowed attitudes about the treatment of people in prison have increased. Penal policies have moved away from the basic principles that correctional services must be effectual, accountable, and humane. Spurred by the tough-on-crime rhetoric marketed by political officials seeking public support, a popular mentality has developed that celebrates the notion that prisoners deserve virulent and monstrous treatment as a part of their sentence. Embedded in this view is the inherent belief that we “get” what we “deserve.” For those of us in prison, it means a menagerie of intolerable, inhumane and unacceptable conditions. Of the more than 2 million people confined in our prisons and jails, many of us become quite familiar with unnecessary and degrading strip-searches, food that is sometimes rotten or marginal in nutritive value, as well as the denial of medical care, medications, and mental health treatment (Open Society Institute, 2004).

The prison complex has become an ominous presence in our society to an extent unmatched in our history. Most people seem to be genuinely perplexed about the current state of crime and punishment in America. They are confused in large part because they are continually besieged with the myths, misconceptions, and half-truths that dominate public discussion (Currie, 1998), while the truths are often hidden or buried, ignored as

the complaints of coddled criminals sorry and remorseful only because we got caught. Against this backdrop, massive prison expansion has occurred, necessitating the construction of larger facilities, in desolate locations, with few amenities or services. Many of the women I met were sent hundreds of miles away from children, family, and friends. Not only do we endure a certain amount of emotional isolation indicative of the prison reality, but many also experience further alienation from the very things that are known to promote and encourage a more positive and crime-free lifestyle upon release. This next statement was made by a woman 3 years into a 5 year sentence at FCI Tallahassee. Her family remains in Washington D.C. where her crimes took place:

How am I supposed to maintain a relationship with my kids when the feds ship me 800 miles away? How am I ‘sposed to be a mom? My kids won’t know me when I get out. Not only am I being punished, but my kids are being punished too. They want to give me classes on how to be a better momma, but I can’t see my own babies! How is it good to have State people taking care of my babies?

My experience within the walls of FCI Tallahassee seems to support the research that most women are sentenced for nonviolent crimes such as fraud or drug-related offenses (see BJS Fact Sheet, 2005, NCJ 210677; Belknap 2001; Owen 1998). However, any attempt to characterize female offenders must be hedged by disclaimers, as no single description can capture the variety of etiologies, traits, susceptibilities, or sheer randomness of influences that impel people to violate the law. I would suggest that the typical female offender, being nonwhite, poor, and a single parent, is repeatedly victimized by society. She is expected to work to support herself and her children and to be a good parent; when she finds these expectations impossible to fulfill, and resorts to crime, she is punished. Yet no assistance was forthcoming to help meet the expectations of medical and family care. She is caught in an un-winnable situation. Most of the women I encountered came from poverty, were addicted to drugs or alcohol, and had

emotional or mental health problems. My bunkie, (an individual with whom you share your bunk-bed), for example, suffered from depression and schizophrenia. She had been violently raped as a teenager, dropped out of high school, and spent time living on the streets. She was a prostitute with a severe drug and alcohol addiction who clumsily robbed banks to support her addictions, her disabled schizophrenic mother, her two children (from two different unsupportive fathers), her drug-addicted younger brother, and the pimp who beat her on a regular basis. She was 23 at the time that we met. Her crimes, like many, were a response to crisis and long-standing disadvantage. The money she earned was the primary source of family income. I am by no means suggesting that these circumstances excuse her criminal behavior, but at the very least, they should certainly help to explain it. She explained her life this way:

...sure I tried to work real jobs, but something always came up and I got fired or I had to quit. My mom was real sick, and if she didn't get her meds, she couldn't take care of my kids. I was making minimum wage and it felt like I was working only enough to pay for medical stuff for my babies and rent to keep us all off the streets. Its not like I woke up one morning and decided that turning tricks was the answer, but my babies' daddies didn't help none. Society has put out there all these things people should strive for, except not all of us get the same chances to get there.

Another woman made this statement:

I've been a prostitute for years; I've been beaten, raped, and sold....but I fed my kids and I had a place for my momma to live. Nobody never wanted to help me then, but now all of a sudden they want to lock me up. It ain't my priorities that need to change, it's how to keep those priorities and not be killed in the meantime.

The Pains of Imprisonment

Prior to my own legal issues, I was one of "those" punitive, get-tough justice system employees. This experience has opened my eyes to the reality of the administration, application, and implementation of judicial processes in this country. I have spent much of the last two years critiquing my earlier convictions, trying to place

those ideals in the present, to make sense of them through the lens of new experiences. Despite the huge expenditure of state and federal dollars on the construction of high-tech facilities, America's jails and prisons remain neglected and vicious institutions (Shelden, 2001). The atrocious and harsh treatment is the intended result of get-tough, no-frills penal values articulated by some of our country's most influential policy makers. Our vengeful penal philosophy has lead to an offensive level of cruelty and human rights abuses, many of which remain largely below the public radar. The following clip is from a woman 3 months into her 12 year sentence for a nonviolent drug crime. Her comment was echoed by a number of female convicts sharing similar experiences:

...this is nothing (in a discussion about conditions in Federal facilities), you should see the fucked up way they treat us in County. People are threatened and raped all the time, but nobody gives a shit 'cuz we're animals. Our words don't mean anything, you can complain all you want; your word against the guards, all that does is get you beat down even more. Get this man, on the outside what we have to say means shit, but by God if you can provide the feds with information about another crime or another criminal (referring to a "rule 35"), our word's are gold. How fucked up is that?

Prisons are a central component in America's criminal justice system. Although we have always relied heavily on incarceration as a sanction for criminal behavior, an examination of the nation's history reveals substantial variation in public attitudes toward convicted felons. While periods of liberal reform appear to be correlated with support for the enlightened treatment of prisoners and the upgrading of prison conditions, in less liberal times, the opposite were true. Over the years, both prisons and jails have employed a variety of punitive and barbaric techniques with the sole purpose of revenge. They also exemplify a tendency to use punishment for its own end, with no regard for potential rehabilitation. This intolerance is reflected in the harsher prison sentences meted out to offenders in recent years. As incarceration rates have increased, living conditions

in prisons and jails have deteriorated (Johnson, 2002). Furthermore, the availability of rehabilitation programs has decreased as the system struggles simply to accommodate the increased prisoner volume. Legislators also continue to publicize their attempts to intensify the pains of imprisonment by reducing such inmate amenities as grants for college education, television privileges, computers in cells, and exercise through weight lifting (Ross and Richards, 2003; Haas and Alpert, 1995). As the next passage indicates, the majority of the women in prison are well-aware of the disconnect that exists between the system's illusion of "correcting" offenders, and the reality of opportunities and survival upon release:

Rehabilitation....I don't think I even know what the fuck that is. It's not that I don't know sellin' drugs is illegal, but what the hell else am I 'sposed to do? If I could change my life, don't you 'spose I'd do it? Do them legal people actually think this is a world I would chose...fuck that, it's called survival. Lock my ass up, that's fine, but I'm gettin' out, and I still can't read, I still can't get and keep a job, I still got babies to support, and I still can't find a decent place to live cuz I got no money and now I got a record, what the fuck else they think I'm gonna do?

From Mainline to the Shakedown Shack

Make no mistake, a significant number of the convicts I met truly belong behind the wires, but I have also struggled somewhat with how I think society has and should respond. On the one hand, I want to be critical of the federal government for warehousing and perpetuating the cycle of violence and despair, but at the same time, I came into contact with plenty of women who were predatory and dangerous, and I strongly believe they should not be wandering freely in society. The research on prisoner-to-prisoner violence seems to suggest that incarcerated women are as violent as incarcerated men, but there also appears to be an exaggerated perception of the violence that does takes place among the women. Aggression, hostility, and physical altercations were an everyday

occurrence. And while the majority of women were quite kind and caring towards one another, the constant bickering, arguing, fighting, and blatant displays of brutality often overshadowed the friendships and loving relationships.

Dealing with the internal strife and the constant conflict was exhausting, but I would assume this discord was indicative of the lives many of these women lived outside the prison walls. I struggled most with the cacophony of noises, day in and day out; it never stopped, it was never quiet. To be sure, the first gang fight I witnessed (not referring to the gang-affiliation type of fighting, but having to do with 4 or 5 women ganging up on one woman), my own experiences of dealing with physical and sexual threat, the first time I witnessed a sexually aggressive/violent act (I will refrain from using the term “rape”), my first institutional lock-down because of “riotess conditions” (the women staged a coup in response to price-gouging in the commissary, poor medical and treatment services, and the constant reign of terror from some specific officers) or the first time I witnessed somebody putting body fluids in the food, all of these things deeply impacted me, but the inability to ever really escape the pandemonium and the chaos was what really most difficult for me. Without any peace, there’s never really time to make sense of all that goes on, to interpret or digest the experiences, or to put them into perspective relative to the women and the personal characteristics and lifestyle choices that landed them in prison in the first place.

....the shakedown shack? Hell, that ain’t worth no fuckin’ visit from no one... lookin’ in my ass and making me take my tampon in and out...that’s bullshit, you know they in there doin’ that for kicks; because they can... [Female convict at FCI Tallahassee]

Reprieve from the degradation and violence was often the least of our concerns, as most of the women focused on the things that really mattered – staying connected with

the outside world and those we loved. There was never any resolve from the staff, guards, or administration. Each and every day, sometimes twice a day, they would line up outside the dining hall (mainline) for some symbolic display of concern and support. “Symbolic” because it was insulting, and it made us feel even more insignificant and transparent. “Symbolic” because blame was shuffled from employee to employee, questions were never answered, and when they were, it generally meant seeing yet another person (or three) with still no resolution. Mail was often destroyed (if we got it at all), phone calls were routinely cut off in mid conversation, money often times never made it to our accounts, and loved ones (including the elderly and very young children) spent hours standing outside in the heat, the rain and the cold waiting for visitation hours that at times were cancelled with no warning and no notice. Here, a couple of the women express the frustration and the anger that develops:

Women prisoners don't fight as hard as the men prisoners do. We as women go for all kinds of bullshit here. We don't stand up for ourselves. We won't help one another; we keep putting each other down, trying to destroy each other. We don't stick together for our religions, nor medical situation here, the men fight for their rights, and they stick together for their beliefs as well. The women conduct themselves awful; they don't respect themselves nor the other women around them. They follow each other and degrade themselves to the lowest point. Women need to become strong in what they believe and not settle for less.

...for our safety? Fuck that. They're in there telling us it's for our own safety – a fire drill in the fucking middle of the night – you know it was only because it was rainin'. It's fucking hurricane season, standing outside with nothing on in the pourin' rain. They just want us to know who's in charge, plus, you know it gave them a chance to shake us all down!

My Thanksgiving meal proved to be just one of a number of monumental experiences. On that particular late afternoon, the dining hall was unusually crowded, the guards were particularly edgy, the women were loud, the quarters were cramped, and I was feeling exceptionally sad and anxious. I generally ate my meals with the same 2 or 3 women, but with such limited space, we were forced to sit wherever we could find a

chair. I ultimately ended up “sharing” my meal with three different women serving lengthy sentences for varying degrees of homicide. Sitting across from me was a harsh, loud Dominican woman with a 200+ sentence for killing her infant, eviscerating the corpse, stuffing it full of drugs, and trying to cross the borders of this country. She made no attempt to hide her feelings of distain and resentment at having to eat with us rather than her usual cohort. This was not my first encounter with her; I disliked her immensely. The woman next to me had been incarcerated for about 16 years (of life) for her part in a string of murders. She was a “serial killer” charged with a number of homicides she and her female partner committed while working in a nursing home in the Midwest (the subject of several books). This lady would later become a tutor, working with me daily at the education center. She was nice, incredibly bright, but also quite “spooky.” Across from her, but still at my table, was a woman serving two of life sentences for killing husbands. She was a pretty woman, petite in stature, soft spoken and pleasant. Her murders were supposedly committed for profit.

Despite the group with which I shared my meal, I often found that those women convicted of the most violent and destructive crimes were pleasant, and the easiest women to be around. Perhaps it was their ability to keep their rage under the surface that allowed them to interact in the general population with very little attention drawn to them. I suppose I need to temper my description of the regularity of the brutality that takes place with a mention that most of the women simply want to do their time with as little conflict and distraction as possible. Most female inmates are not true members of the convict culture, nor do they subscribe to its rules for living. Most of the women I came into contact with merely want to get along in prison without trouble, and to be sure,

many of them have hopes of “going straight” upon release. It is important for them to serve their sentences, steering clear of prison after their release.

Did you here about crazy (name of inmate)? She’s fucking crazy! She beat the shit out of (name of inmate) with a hot iron because she jumped in front of her to iron her slacks! The bitch beat her within an inch of her life! Damn, that crazy (name) spends more goddamn time in the SHU (special housing unit). [Female convict at FCI Tallahassee]

For many women, the experiences of arrest and conviction are enough to deter future criminality.

One woman contemplates the “cost” of her crime, explaining to me that the process of going through the system was punishment enough:

It ain’t worth it! All that money I stole, I pissed it away and had nothing to show for it. Now I’m in here, my family hates me, I’m not sure I can go back to my hometown, I’ll probably never find a job, all this shame and embarrassment. But really, all the feds had to do was arrest me and put my name in the paper – I didn’t need to come here to prison, to be beat down, or to see what I’ve seen – I’d never commit another crime just from all the stuff that happened to me before I got here.

Another Look at the War on Drugs

The “war on drugs” has also become a war on women. Female arrestees test positive for drug use at a higher rate than males do, and increased drug use among women translates into more crimes such as possession, sales, and petty theft (see Mann, 1995; Merlo, 1995; Singer et al., 1995 as cited in Owen, 1998). Incarcerating people who use illegal drugs and isolating them from society is the cornerstone of drug war policy. This policy, however, runs counter to the best interests of society because it fosters the illusion that the cost of imprisoning large numbers of people for behavior that is not inherently immoral can safely be overlooked. I have met hundreds of women who would disagree. Today in the United States 500,000 people wake up each day in prison for the use of some illegal drug – often not even use, for mere association with someone who uses an illegal drug can bring imprisonment for 20 to life (The Committee on Unjust

Sentencing, 2001). Destruction of the life of each drug war prisoner dooms the lives of separated family members, children, spouses, and others left behind. If you define success as reduction of the rate of illegal drug use over the periods that the War on Drugs has been in operation, one can say that it has not brought about even marginal success.

Barbara Owen suggests that the dramatic rise in the women's prison population is the result of shifts in the criminal justice system's response to female offending. A shortsighted punitive response by legislation to drug use is a direct and unfortunate result of the war on drugs. The research also indicates that minor property offenses clearly account for a significant proportion of female incarceration. Instead of a policy of last resort, imprisonment has become the first order response for a wide range of women offenders that have disproportionately been swept up in the war on drugs (Owen, 1998). A "zero tolerance" response such as this overlooks the fiscal or social costs of imprisonment, and further, it ignores the opportunities to prevent female offending because it cuts crucial social services, educational programs, and other barriers to economic success. Instead, this money is used to fund and perpetuate the ever-increasing correctional budgets.

In my 6 months as FCI Tallahassee, I met hundreds of women, the majority of whom were non-violent drug-offenders, many first-time offenders. These women are serving lengthy sentences, and unfortunately, they will serve the majority of their sentences, as parole no longer exists in the federal system. I met a woman serving 7 years for child molestation, child rape, and crimes stemming from the acts and solicitation of these crimes on the Internet. At the same time, I became friends with a number of women serving 20+ years to life for illegal drug crimes ranging from possession, use, and the

ever-popular and judicially-flexible conspiracy. And while some might argue that this is a rare situation, I can assure you it is not! FCI Tallahassee, like most facilities, warehouses far more drug offenders for longer periods of time than those violent women charged with crimes of assault, or robbery/burglary with a weapon (<http://www.bop.gov>). The following statements highlight the punitive nature of this country's drug laws:

...I am a victim of the federal conspiracy laws, which hands down lengthy sentences that don't coincide with the offenses. I know that drugs have destroyed many families, and I'll be the first to admit that my activity and role in selling drugs was wrong, but I did sell drugs from 14 years old to 23 years old to support myself and my family due to my family being very poor. I really didn't have a choice. My mother sold me to a man to support her habit of using drugs. My "boyfriend" was 36 years old and I was only 14 years old. He was like a father to me, giving me love, care and attention, which now I'm doing a 20 year sentence for conspiracy because of him.

I am a 27 year old white-native American women, and was never in any trouble my entire life. I am a first-time offender of a nonviolent crime and have been fighting the courts for my freedom since 1992. My original sentence was life and 5 years for conspiracy. In 1996, my sentence was reduced to 35 years, but in 1997 this sentence was vacated, and in 1998, I was re-sentenced to 85 years.

Apathy in Suffering

Have you been to the fucking upper compound? [A certain lieutenant] showed up to show off to a SWAT team-looking group of thugs practicing maneuvers. This riot bullshit has really pissed some folks off. The goons were dressed in riot gear; they were tossing smoke bombs, shooting blanks, racing around and yelling. The fuckers are marching around the perimeter of the compound with a cadence "song" - something like this, "...look to your right what do you see, I see female inmates staring back at me." [Female convict at FCI Tallahassee]

I hate this place. There is an awkward, nauseating aroma – a mixture of flowers and feminine hair products, watered-down disinfectant, and rotten meat (contraband left in someone's locker). I hate how the women smell. I hate how the guards smell. I hate how I smell. I hate that you can predict how the day/evening will go by the sickening cologne that wafts in from the main office of the unit – the predictability of knowing which guards are on duty, whether I will sleep tonight, or whether it will be another night of "anything goes." I hate how the male guards leer and the female guards chastise. I hate this place. [One of my personal journal entries].

Security

If they were not yelling at us, writing us up for random and inane rule infractions, or socializing with the others, the guards walked past us as if we were all transparent. I suppose they simply tune us out, blank and cynical to the individual convicts. I suppose they have seen and heard it all. On occasion, there would be a guard, sympathetic in addressing concerns of the women, sharing a bit of humor or good news, or sincere in asking certain women about the various stages of their court process, but unfortunately, most were cruel and demeaning. Perhaps too often they hear the women complain, deny responsibility, or project blame onto others for their own misbehaviors. I suppose it makes their job easier, seeing us as only a number, a statistic, or a piece of trash. Many of these women have undoubtedly been treated as second-class citizens most of their lives, why should this place be any different?

The Relationships

Understand that by all BOP (Bureau of Prisons) guidelines, there is no such thing as “consensual sex” within any facility. All sexual activity is therefore considered rape. While acknowledging the fact that the majority of the women did not take part in the oftentimes juvenile and grade school-like “coupling,” the sexually charged nature of the facility cannot be ignored. Much of the arguing and many of the fights that took place were in response to transgressions in a relationship. The nature of the “interactions” ranged from sincere and “loving” (mock marriage ceremonies were not uncommon) to childish and self-indulgent. Public displays of affection were grounds for placement in the SHU, however, a certain amount of physical interaction was tolerated and often times it was knowingly overlooked.

As I observed it, the relationships tended to fall into roughly four (4) categories. I am certain there could be more, and I am sure that there is significant overlap and drift from one group to another. I do not pretend to know why the women behave as they do, falling into one relationship or another, nor do I presume to know how these relationships evolve or the dynamics that keep them going. The “associations” are not defined merely in sexual terms, or by sexual acts alone, because I witnessed a variety of relationships that had nothing to do with physical intimacy. Many of the Latino and Hispanic women, for example, developed exceptionally close “families” that included sisters, daughters, cousins, and even “nephews and sons.” Some women assumed surprisingly masculine positions, including the adoption of male dress (even though we all wore the same uniform), hairstyle, jobs and duties, and other specifically masculine roles. This masculine “function” played a part in both the intimate relationships, as well as the more domestic, functional family unit. It is worth noting that race was not a social organizing factor, personal and sexual relationships among the women were often interracial and interethnic.

There is a predominantly “heterosexual” group. These women are typically married or have boyfriends at the time of their incarceration. They may be approached by other women in the facility, but they remain faithful to the ascribed male-female relationships. In my view, this appeared to be the majority of the women. A large “homosexual” group existed as well. These women were lesbians on the outside, maintained “healthy” monogamous homosexual relationships with partners on the outside, and will most likely remain homosexual upon their release. These women may at times become involved in a relationship while incarcerated, but being locked up has not

directly impacted their sexuality. There were a number of ladies in heterosexual relationships on the outside, but for a variety of reasons become involved with another woman while incarcerated. This makes up the third group. I met a number of women who were married to men, or who at one time had “boyfriends” on the outside, but for reasons such as companionship, intimacy, fear of alienation/loneliness with long-term sentences, etc. become involved with other incarcerated females. The convicts referred to this as “gay for the stay.” The “bull-daggers” (or “bull-dagging”) make up the final grouping of women. These relationships were characterized by multiple partners, included the swapping of partners, and sometimes forced/coerced sexual activity/favors. Typically one women was very much dominating, the other(s) would work, cook, clean, fight, and perform sexual favors for the one in charge.

Medical Care

Access to medical care was extremely difficult for many women as the staff was often unavailable, and when appointments were made (and kept), the staff often times minimized inmate concerns, and in some cases, blatantly ignored them. It makes sense that incarcerated women may have more serious health problems than women outside. This may be because of the increased likelihood of living in poverty, limited access to preventative medical care, poor nutrition, chemical dependency, or perhaps limited education on matters related to health. Brown and Macallair (2005) suggest that the majority of incarcerated women have never had access to health care. These women have never been employed in a job that provides for any sort of medical or psychological assistance, or because of homelessness, excessive mobility (constantly moving from one place to another), and lack of resource awareness, they were never in a position where

these crucial needs could be addressed. One of the main problems in women's prisons also has to do with the lack of skilled and available medical care (as cited in Belknap, 2001). At FCI Tallahassee, we had one medical "worker" rumored to be a "caretaker of animals" from another country. This is highly likely, but I can tell you without a doubt (as I was there), that not only did he tell a woman her "uterus would grow back," he told another women she was "lactating because of a sinus infection." Surprisingly, these two "diagnoses" were not the most ignorant or ridiculous statements this man ever made.

The shortage of medical care for women is further exacerbated when one acknowledges the greater medical needs for women. The American Correctional Association (1990) reported that 1 in 5 U.S. prisons lack the gynecological/obstetrical services that most women require. While I attempted to go to "sick call" twice during my stay, both times I waited in excess of 7 hours only to be turned away with a dismissing instruction to "go buy antihistamines at the commissary." A solution, by the way, that had absolutely nothing to do with my physical malady.

Did you hear what they told us? They said that if they saw any of us helping her, they'd send us to the SHU. Can you believe that? She's got that scar all the way across her head that's still oozing, she can barely move. What's she supposed to do, lay there in her own piss and shit? How's she supposed to get to the dining hall, or even to the shower? That's bullshit man. [This comment was made by the bunkmate of a woman who had had emergency surgery to remove a brain tumor and was subsequently shipped back to our unit roughly a week after the operation.]

It's Good Work if You Can Find It

I was lucky enough to land one of the coveted jobs as a "tutor" in the education center. There were a number of advantages to having such a job, including better pay (21 cents an hour as opposed to 7 or 11 cents an hour), better working conditions/hours, and at times, deference from both convict and staff. Having this job implied "education" and

that garnered instant respect from most. When I first got the job, some of the women were angry because I had “jumped past” the initial job sequence (starting at the kitchen, moving into the laundry room, etc.). This did create friction and animosity, but having this job also meant a certain amount of reverence (and tolerance) because now I had “access” to certain things – this was vital in the world of bartering, trading, and collecting. “Power” seemed to be attained in a variety of ways, the “skills” someone possessed, for example, (being able to sew or alter clothing), or the ability to instill fear in others. I was able to “acquire” certain items during my stay, and this was significant to me, as well as some of the other women around me. Being able to “align” yourself with certain staff indeed had its benefits, but as with most things in prison, there were times it also came with a heavy price.

I was used to teaching at the college level, but none of my educational experience prepared me for the types of women I’d meet, or the desperate and tragic needs they would display. To be fair, most of the time I hated this job! The women were “forced” to be there, which meant they made sure every one around them was miserable too. The one main incentive to attend class was an increase in pay, but this motivated very few. Many of them signed up for the class as a way to get out of working. On more than one occasion, a woman would refuse to work adamantly stating that she’d simply “buy” her GED when she got out. A number of the women, however, were more realistic in their frustration, wondering out loud why it would matter anyway when finishing their prison sentence meant going back to the same poor, destitute, disorganized neighborhood where job opportunities were limited and education had little real meaning.

It was difficult for me to argue with the logic of the women as they discussed how education and training would impact their lives upon release. It makes sense, on some level, that what we (FCI) teach them (whether its math and science, or masonry and horticulture) will have only marginal influence on their abilities to find legitimate employment. It is good while they are “inside,” as it fills the empty days and gives them something to do, but very little of what they learned would be practical in “their” world – they would not be returning to “my” world or the world of mainstream society. Their reality demands such very different things.

Beyond the Punishment

Another day, another chance. New hope, new mercy. [Writing on a bathroom stall.]

In addition to the hopelessness, pain, and desperation, I also witnessed genuine companionship, unmatched by anything I had experienced in my life. There are times now that I find I am far more comfortable in a room full of ex-cons than I am in a room full of academics or “professionals.” As a friend of mine (and current convict) once said, “...in prison, no one cares enough to pass judgment.” I watched friendships grow in women who had spent the majority of their lives equating love with pain and suffering. I endured violence, fear, and trepidation almost daily. But I need to let the reader know that I also experienced friendship, laughter, camaraderie, and a sense of belonging. I recall a number of evenings spent sitting outside on “the patio” (cement stoops that lined the compound), talking with the women about life, love, goals and aspirations, fear, grief, and loss. We could have been anywhere. Sitting with one or two of the women I have come to call friends reminded me of the power of faith and the value of self-reflection. Most of us would never have been friends in any other world; we were friends now by virtue of a shared criminality. I met strong and gifted women; devoted to their families,

blessed in their friendships with others, and humbled by the grace of God. I met women who'd spent years being battered and beaten. While I did meet women from power, wealth, and money, the majority of women struggled against abuse, poverty, limited resources and a dismal outlook for the future. Many of these women are uneducated, but not stupid. They are tired; they are out of hope, love, and opportunities. They have simply given up on a society that gave up on them a long time ago.

Behind these walls are some of the most beautiful women I have ever seen – elegant, demur, and proud; stunning even. Unfortunately, most of the women around me, although they try to hide it, project a look of death and desperation. The effects of drugs and alcohol so vividly clear; the toll time has taken on their faces and the permanent stains of abuse that mark their bodies and their minds. The vacant look in their eyes and the stories they tell haunt me. [One of my personal journal entries].

Very little was respected among the women, but I observed a strange sanctity in the memories and reminders of loved ones – children, husbands, life-partners. Even the “enemies” could come together in shared celebration of family. There was a primacy in these relationships and this had an enormous impact on the overall values shaping the culture of the facility. Milestones such as birthdays and anniversaries were acknowledged with warmth and respect, but also with grief and intensity. Tragedy was all around us, some from far off places, others, from a bunk or two over. Several women died while I was there, how or why they died matters little now, but the way the women came together to express anger, hopelessness, and desperation demonstrated a group cohesion that was rarely seen.

It's so loud in here tonight because [a certain female guard] is working and she's just as ghetto as the women. We see her at 4pm count and 10pm count, but never in between. The women run wild all night because she's too busy sitting in the front office talking with her “friends.” I know I won't miss all of this chaos...my cube mates are funny tonight though.... I will miss them a bit. How is it I feel guilty for leaving these women behind? M. is getting a pedicure, T. is working with one of the Spanish mommies on her English, and S. has sort-of just floated amongst a number of her friends. L. (next door) is in typical fashion, sitting on

her bunk quietly reading, pictures of her kids spread out in front of her. She chimes into various conversations now and then. I will miss her singing to me (and others) at night...it's peaceful and soothing. I know I have been one of the lucky ones with regards to my bunkies. We got on each other's nerves on occasion, but when it counted, we were there for each other, standing together against both convict and guard. [Journal entry from my last night in prison]

Conclusion

By close of the postmodern era there were nearly 2 million individuals serving time in prisons and jails. Despite the “crime drop” of the 1990s, prisons continued to be built and populations continued to rise. Yet the most ignored fact of this rise was that while most Americans believed that hardened criminals were the ones being sent to prison, the reality is that most of the added offenders were placed there for misdemeanors and a large portion of those were for minor drug offenses (Oliver and Hilgenberg, 2006). The following comment from a female acquaintance of mine at FCI Tallahassee demonstrates society’s tendency simply throw people away:

I am a 27 year old Black woman with 3 children. I am a first time offender and innocent of crime.... just guilty of association with child's father. I have served 9 years of a life sentence.

Most people seem to truly misunderstand what it means to “do time.” Prisons, for both men and women, are seen as obscure and distant places of punishment and deterrence; where pain and suffering are allowed and at times even encouraged. While the connection between the motivations for crime and the deterrent effect of imprisonment is unclear at best, the general community continues to believe that prisons should have some effect on the crime rate. Throughout the nation, this has not proven to be the case. As prison populations continue to rise, there seems to be little appreciable difference in crime rates (Austin and Irwin, 2001). As many scholars suggest, the failure of prison policy to reduce crime is based on an incorrect belief in the power of

deterrence, something I have experienced and witnessed personally as I was marshaled through the criminal justice system and from the women I met along the way.

Common thought has it that the prison system is not so bad, and that prison time is easy or inconsequential (Johnson, 2002). Prisons today are indeed far less cruel than when they were first invented, but that does not mean that incarceration is an experience without pain. In place of physical suffering, the modern prison inflicts a far more severe damage that is spiritual and social in nature. The loss of freedom is indeed fundamental, as is the loss of social status and the lifetime of labeling that come with being a convict. Chuck Terry, also a former convict, proffers that in addition to the physical adjustment to isolation in an over-crowded and often violent world, there is a psychological adjustment that must be made as well. The problem is not simply being locked up with hundreds of strangers, but is also with the difficulty of having one's self-esteem and identity inundated with the evidence of an unsuccessful life and the view that you are somehow less human and less worthy. Few see prison as an intricate social and psychological world, where the individual is extraordinarily overwhelmed and hampered with challenges so profound that one's very own identity is at stake (Terry, 2000). There is a self-loathing that develops among convicts (myself included), a personal feeling of diminished self-worth perpetuated by a system more concerned with effectiveness and efficiency than with human life.

...I feel lost...how crazy is that? I also feel guilty that I am out here, and they are still in there. I was in prison for 6 months, 6 months of hell, the lowest point in my life ever. I was down only a short time and I cannot even pretend that I know what its like to serve a lengthy sentence. But even with my short sentence, there is a hole left in my soul and it feels like it can only be filled by those people who understand the damage that is done, the anger that creeps in, the idiosyncrasies that are acquired, and the dreams I cannot escape. [Journal entry 13 days after my release]

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