

Changing Perceptions of the Etiology of Crime: The Relationship Between Abuse and Female Criminality

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between female criminality and the experience of abuse. A survey was administered to 557 female inmates at two correctional centers in Oklahoma. Eighty percent of the subjects reported being abused, and 72.3 percent of the subjects surveyed experienced at least two types of abuse. Abused inmates were more likely to report substance abuse problems, emotional problems, interpersonal problems, and have a pessimistic attitude towards life after prison. Our findings suggest the need for more research about the connection between women's criminality and abuse, and the development of programs for incarcerated women who have been abused.

Introduction

Most of the research available on the criminality of women suggests that there is a relationship between crime and environmental factors such as economic opportunity or attitudes towards women. However, many aspects of women's experiences have yet to be examined, especially in relation to the rapidly increasing number of incarcerated women. This study examines the relation between the criminality of women and the experience of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse.

Historical View of Women in Prison and Prison Reform in the United States

An examination of the limited literature on the history of the incarceration of women reveals a complex set of social, political, and personal problems experienced by women in this country over the last two centuries. By the early nineteenth century, the reasons for incarcerating women and their plight once in prison were of concern to prison reformers. According to Freedman (1981) in *Their Sisters' Keepers*, three conditions began to emerge in the 1820s which gave rise to the prison reform movement for women. First, most northern states adopted the prison as a primary means of punishing and reducing criminal activity. Second, a small but significant number of women became inmates of these prisons, especially after 1940. Finally, middle-class American women, motivated both by benevolence and their growing consciousness as a sex, became active in reform movements that brought them into contact with their imprisoned sisters. Two social forces--the increasing rate of incarcerated women and a growing social consciousness among middle class women--merged to create a prison reform movement which is still evolving today.

Freedman (1981) suggests that the growing rate of women in prison between 1815 and 1860 can be linked to social change, especially urbanization, and new agents of social control such as urban police and moral reformers. Under these influences, "not serious crimes against persons or property, but unlawful personal behavior--drunkenness, idle and disorderly conduct, and vagrancy--brought the majority of criminals of both sexes into the courts and prisons (Freedman, 1981, p. 14)." However, Freedman states that the moral codes for women were stricter, and therefore, women were more likely to be convicted of such crimes. In addition, she points out that fewer job opportunities and lower wages for women resulted in economic marginalization and increased the need for women to resort to crimes such as prostitution, especially during wars, when men were not able to support their families. Prostitution was often the most readily available way for women to support themselves and their children. Once convicted or even suspected of a crime, a woman became even further marginalized. The penalty for the nineteenth century female criminal was the label "fallen woman," and both men and women shunned anyone suspected of being a "fallen woman." Because of this stigma, the female prisoner was largely neglected and often subjected to "overcrowding, harsh treatment, and sexual abuse . . ." (Freedman, 1981, p. 15).