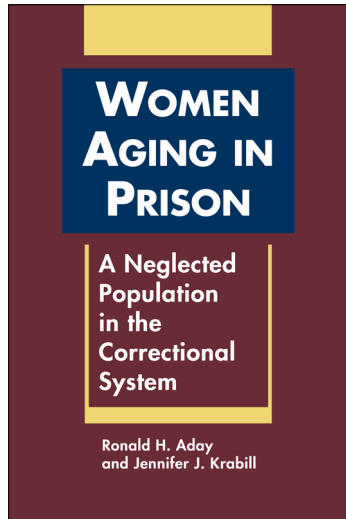


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# Women Aging in Prison: A Neglected Population in the Correctional System

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# Contents

<i>List of Tables</i>	vii
1 Older Women in Prison	1
2 Aging and Prison Adjustment	21
3 Health and Fears of Dying	47
4 Connections to the Free World	73
5 Making a Life in Prison	103
6 The Pervasive Context of Intimate Partner Abuse	129
7 Personal Transformation Behind Bars: An Intimate Look	153
8 Policy Issues and Future Concerns	183
<i>References</i>	213
<i>Index</i>	233
<i>About the Book</i>	239

# 1

## Older Women in Prison

**T**HE GRAYING OF AMERICA IS HAVING A TREMENDOUS INFLUENCE on almost all of our social institutions, including our nation's prison system. Elderly inmates are considered the fastest growing group of inmates in most states' prison systems, and as the general population becomes grayer so too will the prison population. It may seem unusual to think of older women as criminals; however, older incarcerated women are also a distinct reality. While the graying of prisoners in the United States mirrors the growth of an aging population, older inmates suffer from the complications of accelerated aging. Many women arrive in prison after years of unhealthy living, victimization, and drug use, and as they age in place become even more vulnerable to the rigors of incarceration. The exposure to the stressors of prison life frequently only makes them sicker and more costly to manage. As inmates remain in prison for longer periods, and in greater numbers, they are having dynamic policy implications for correctional systems already facing rising health-care costs and strapped economies.

Only recently has the involvement of older women with crime and criminal justice agencies become the subject of increased scrutiny (Caldwell, Jarvis & Rosefield, 2001; Krabill & Aday, 2005; Williams & Rikard, 2004). The special needs of female inmates have been largely overshadowed by a preoccupation with the predominantly male prison population. While the rate of increase in the overall number of women in prison has been phenomenal, male inmates continue to constitute the majority of prisoners. The fact that female inmates account for only a fragment of the total prison population has been used to excuse the system's failure to address the unique needs of female offenders (Acoca, 1998; Wahidin, 2004). In many state correctional systems, female

offenders have become nothing more than an afterthought in a primarily male dominated system. Anderson (2006) has recently argued that the justification for this disparity is no longer valid given the current rise of female incarceration rates. As a result, there has been a renewed call for rethinking gender, crime, and justice (Renzetti, Goodstein & Miller, 2006).

One primary reason limited attention has been granted to aging prisoners is this small, yet growing, segment of the population surfaces from controversies surrounding the most effective measure for defining oldness (Aday, 2003). In general, most experts concur that 65—the age typically used in distinguishing later adulthood for persons residing in mainstream society—would be an inappropriate benchmark to apply in institutional settings. Given that occupants arrive at the facilities with background demographic and lifestyle characteristics that predispose them to certain health complications, and consequently, notice marked declines in physical, cognitive, mental, and social functioning at younger ages than their free-world counterparts, the age at which oldness begins must be adjusted accordingly. Most experts now agree that 50-year-old inmates possess health characteristics of someone at least ten years older (Williams, 2006), and many states now use this age to characterize what constitutes an elderly inmate.

### **Age and Gender Pathways to Crime**

Over the past several decades, older individuals have witnessed a dramatic increase in all areas of society. As arrest statistics inform us, the aging of the baby boom generation has altered the composition of the population at large and has also affected the demographics of those who will come into contact with the criminal justice system in any given year. Although younger individuals (persons in the 15–19 and 20–24 year age ranges) continue to represent the largest segment of persons who are arrested and are overrepresented among arrests in comparison to their presence within the total US population, the 50 and older category is currently experiencing a transition that exceeds the rate of growth that had once been projected. As Table 1.1 indicates, in 1998, persons age 50 and over accounted for approximately 473,162, or 4.2 percent, of all arrests. This figure rose to 895,419 in 2009 comprising 8.4 percent of arrests from all age groups. As Table 1.1 shows, the significant rise in the number of older citizen arrests actually occurred during the 5 years from 2004 to 2009. Major increases in criminal activity

**Table 1.1 Gender Differences in Number and Percentage of Arrests for All Crimes, Age 50 and Over, 1998–2009**

	Number of Arrests			Percent Change
	1998	2004	2009	
<i>Males</i>				
50–54	194,912	266,395	377,048	+93.4
55–59	98,742	127,852	190,341	+92.7
60–64	51,319	59,614	85,009	+65.6
65+	53,325	49,672	64,082	+20.1
Total	398,298	503,533	716,480	+44.4
<i>Females</i>				
50–54	38,805	62,340	99,500	+156.4
55–59	17,457	26,702	42,964	+146.1
60–64	8,300	11,597	18,592	+124.0
65+	10,302	10,638	17,883	+73.5
Total	74,864	92,639	178,939	+139.0
Total	473,162	533,969	895,419	+89.2

*Source:* US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics*, 1998, 2004, 2009 (Washington, DC: USGPO).

were apparent for both males and females for all age categories shown, with the exception for those 65 years of age or older. As can be garnered from the available data, the most significant increase witnessed within this time frame has been among women who are between the ages of 50 and 54 years. In a little more than a decade, the numbers rose from 38,805 offenders in 1998 to 99,500 in 2009, resulting in a 156 percent increase. Additional segments of the population to experience significant gains in number included women 55–59 and 60–64 years of age, witnessing a 146 and 124 percent increase respectively. Surprisingly, women in the 65 and over age category practically doubled during the same time period.

The increase in the number of reported arrests from 1998 to 2009 is most dramatic when compared to a similar time period in the 1990s. For example, Aday (2003) reported an actual 3 percent decline in the number of arrests for older males 50 years and older between 1989 and 1998 and a modest 3 percent increase for older females. The only increases found for either males or females were in the 50–54 age category. Given the dramatic increases during this time frame, there is some evidence of what some might term a geriatric crime wave. It is apparent that as baby boomers continue to age, the criminal justice system will see an increas-

ing number of older offenders in the coming decades. Truly, these numbers are indicative of the swell of baby boomers now reaching retirement age and finding jail and sometimes prison as their final retirement destination.

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), women made up more than a quarter of all people convicted of felony property offenses in 2009. Twenty-six percent of those convicted of felony property crimes were women, compared to 18 percent of those convicted of felony drug crimes, 10 percent of those convicted of violent felonies, and 4 percent of those convicted of felony weapons crimes. Women, in general, were greater than four times more likely to be convicted of a nonviolent felony (property or drug crime) than they were to be convicted of a violent felony.

Comparing the general patterns of growth in older male and female arrestees is only the first step in understanding who is entering the system in increasing numbers. As illustrated in Table 1.2, the crimes older women commit, at every period in time, have been heavily concentrated in the areas of drug- and property-related offenses, with significantly

**Table 1.2 Gender Differences in Number of Arrests for Categories of Crimes, Age 50 and Over, 1998–2009**

	Number of Arrests							
	1998		2004		2009		Percent Change	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
<i>Violent crimes</i>								
Murder	477	85	498	88	614	82	+28	-03
Rape	1,135	10	1,160	7	1,306	10	+15	0
Robbery	885	102	1,490	169	2,234	299	+152	+193
Aggravated assault	16,115	2,456	17,454	3,225	24,007	5,133	+49	+109
<i>Property crimes</i>								
Burglary	2,800	590	4,254	883	7,286	1,432	+160	+159
Larceny-theft	23,372	13,167	30,321	16,809	43,801	27,420	+87	+108
Auto theft	1,167	163	1,627	238	1,796	316	+53	+93
Arson	345	99	409	118	505	132	+46	+33
<i>Selected crimes</i>								
Drugs	23,676	3,855	42,184	8,186	63,809	13,725	+169	+256
Other assaults	41,955	6,519	44,182	9,580	64,992	15,366	+54	+135

Source: US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics*, 1998, 2004, 2009 (Washington, DC: USGPO).

fewer committing violent crimes. Property crimes for which older women have entered into contact with the criminal justice system in increasing numbers over the past decade include burglary, larceny/theft, as well as auto-vehicle theft. According to Uniform Crime Reports data that are shown in Table 1.2, women 50 years of age and older committed only 590 of the total burglaries that were reported by police in 1998, and yet, accounted for an estimated 1,432 that occurred in the year 2009. Similarly, we notice a dramatic rise in larceny theft when examining the arrest trends reported for 2009. Although the literature concerning female criminality has historically documented a strong correlation between the use of illegal substances, treatment for addictions, and arrests for engagement in criminal behaviors (Beck, 1999; McQuaide & Ehrenreich, 1998; Snell & Morton, 1994), the introduction of crack cocaine into the inner-city drug market, the war on drugs, and the more stringent enforcement of drug-related policies contributed to a significant rise in arrests for drug-related offenses during this period of time.

Violent offenses, as illustrated by Uniform Crime Reports data, represent only a small fraction of the total number of offenses women will engage in during any given year. As numerous studies conducted in recent years have documented, however, the proliferation of pro-arrest and mandatory arrest laws have contributed to a rise in the number of women who have been arrested for these offenses. Beginning in the 1980s, research conducted on the resolution of domestic violence disputes began to surface suggesting arrest may be a more effective deterrent to further engagement in criminal activities than would be police use of mediation and other conflict-resolution strategies (Sherman & Beck, 1984). In the following years, numerous states began implementing policies to restrict the use of police discretion. By 2002, twenty-two states had enacted regulations mandating arrests in cases involving assault and battery charges, whereas thirty-three had policies that required arrest under circumstances with persons who have been identified as having violated previously issued restraining orders (Hirschell & Buzawa, 2002). Although laws were undoubtedly created as a mechanism for protecting and preserving the well-being of women who would otherwise be on the receiving end of abuse by their significant others, they would additionally contribute to an increasing number of women entering the criminal justice system as offenders (Miller, 2006; Miller & Meloy, 2006). As of 2007, female offenders were reported as being responsible for approximately 23 percent of all violent offenses, which included 12 percent of the total number of homicides, 12 percent of robberies, and 28 percent of aggravated assaults.

## The Graying Prison Populaton

The US prison population has experienced a continual growth over the past three decades, reaching a national prison census of over 1.6 million at year end 2009 (West & Sabol, 2010). This figure represents just a slight increase in the federal prison population and the first decline in the state prison population since 1977. Among this vast number are 115,308 incarcerated females. While women make up a small percentage of incarcerated adults in the US prison system, the number of women in prison is increasing at a much faster rate than that of men. The growth of female imprisonment is evident by the fact that in 1977 the United States imprisoned 24 male prisoners for every female inmate, and by 2007 the ratio had fallen to 13 male prisoners for every female prisoner. One of the major effects frequently identified as being associated with the rise in numbers of older adults committing criminal activities involves an increased presence of elders within state and federal prisons. In 2009, more than 198,000 incarcerated persons (or approximately 13 percent of inmates) were 50 years of age or older (American Correctional Association, 2010). Among this number are more than 7,000 incarcerated females age 50 years and older representing about 5 percent of the older adult prison population.

There are several factors contributing to the growth of the older female prison population. In the 1980s a fundamental shift toward a more retributive and punitive response to crime occurred. The establishment of longer mandatory sentences, the war on drugs, and the abolition of parole in some states are some of the factors contributing to the increasing number of long-term inmates (Anno et al., 2004). For example, some states have introduced sentencing laws such as “mandatory minimums” and “three strikes and you’re out” legislation requiring significantly longer sentences for certain offenses (Mezey et al., 2002; Byock, 2002). As our nation has become tougher on criminals in general, there has also been a trend in our justice system toward putting women in prison and giving them longer sentences (Caldwell, Jarvis & Rosefield, 2001; Pollock, 2004; Young & Reviere, 2006). Another simple explanation for the increase in the older female population is that with a rapidly growing aging population there are now greater numbers of older females to commit crimes. While there is no evidence of a “geriatric crime wave,” the fact is elderly persons, including women, are committing more serious crimes. With the possibility of spending a major portion of their lives in prison, the aging prison population has created an increasing number of end-of-life issues as more offenders are at greater risk for dying in prison (Granse, 2003).



## Researching Women in Prison

The fact that incarcerated women represent a much-neglected population among scholars was first brought to the forefront by Kathryn Watterson's groundbreaking *Women in Prison* first published in 1973. Broadly exposing the reality of prison life for women incarcerated across the United States and the resilient coping strategies as they fought for survival, Watterson identified numerous topics crying out for much-needed research attention. Watterson's work, along with Carol Smart's classic work *Women, Crime and Criminology: A Feminist Critique* (1976), identified a new field of feminist inquiry (Britton, 2000). Scholars in subsequent years have addressed a variety of gendered issues ranging from women's experiences as victims to those found in the structural arrangement of contemporary women's prisons. Special attention has been given to imprisoned mothers and their children, abused women and incarceration, inequitable health care, gender disparity in prison programming, the use of violence in the control of women inmates, the general pains of imprisonment, and women's stories of survival to mention a few.

The significant growth in the women's prison population has resulted in a renewed interest in exploring the consequences of prisonization, not only for inmates themselves but also for their families and those responsible for managing the unique problems facing female prisoners. New issues continue to emerge as the prison demographic changes toward an older inmate population, resulting in prisons being confronted with any number of end-of-life issues—for example, special health-care needs such as long-term care (Mara, 2002); health-care cost and delivery (Braithwaite, Arriola & Newkirk, 2006); malign neglect toward aging female inmates (Williams & Rikard, 2004); inadequate programming and facilities (Caldwell, Jarvis & Rosefield, 2001); penal harm issues associated with dying in prison (Deaton, Aday & Wahidin, 2009–2010; Granse, 2003); and victimization in prison (Miller, 2006).

Social scientists have increasingly been drawn to US prisons for a number of reasons. The prison environment provides rare opportunities for a variety of methodological interests and purposes (Patenaude, 2004; Liebling, 1999; Miller, 2006). For example, prisons as a microcosm provide research opportunities for both qualitative and quantitative explorations. Whether conducting a national survey on the health-care needs of the new woman inmate (Young & Reviere, 2001) or an ethnographic field study focusing on the daily experiences of women aging in prison (Wahidin, 2004), the opportunity to engage in relevant research that may

potentially influence public policy can be attractive. As prisons see an increase in older inmates, correctional systems responsible for formulating and financing current policies are confronted with any number of serious issues that must be addressed. Questions currently being raised by criminal justice officials and legislators alike include (see Aday, 2003): (1) Is there a limit on how much we want to spend on long-term incarceration? (2) How do we maintain a safe environment for older, frail inmates? (3) Do we build special needs facilities for aging women? (4) How do we assist older offenders so they make a successful transition into and out of prison? (5) What type of end-of-life care should be implemented for those inmates serving life in prison? (6) How can prisons better assist female inmates suffering from life-long victimization and related mental health issues? These and other pending challenges have created a sense of urgency among scholars searching to make a difference by engaging in pragmatic and policy-oriented prison research impacting aging female offenders (Deaton, Aday & Wahidin, 2009–2010).

Engaging in prison research can be a complicated endeavor, especially for those coming from the outside. Azrini Wahidin (2004) provides a lively discussion concerning the problems of “breaking in” or doing research in prison. Issues raised by other researchers include the procedural hoops involved in obtaining entry into a specific prison setting, gaining and maintaining trust of inmates and prison officials, and how to best capture the subjective experiences of those incarcerated (Liebling, 1999; Patenaude, 2004). In meeting this challenge, Alison Liebling (1999) has reflected on both the values and problems when using qualitative and quantitative styles of research in the prison setting. Liebling cautions against prison research that is devoid of “emotions.” As Liebling (1999, p. 147) acknowledges, “research in any human environment without subjective feeling is almost impossible—particularly in a prison.” While researching the experiences of females in prison lends itself to a qualitative approach (Wahidin, 2004), conducting actual field research where researchers can spend extended periods of time observing the prison culture can be problematic. The degree of intrusion into the prison environment, close contact with inmates and staff, and the potential for disruption can cause concern for any correctional institution (Aday, 2003; Patenaude, 2004). Rather, more structured qualitative research designs, such as focus groups or in-depth open-ended interviews, are more likely the method types utilized by contemporary prison researchers (Liebling, 1999; Patenaude, 2004; Wahidin, 2004).

## Study Design and Format

In investigating the views and experiences of growing old in women's prisons, we used a three-pronged approach. First, every attempt was made to conduct a thorough review of the relevant literature for each topic presented. We found this to be a challenging task because much of the existing research on prisons had been carried out either on male samples or with younger female prison populations. In fact, existing studies only rarely used age differences when reporting on prison experiences. Only a handful of studies have actually focused on the pains of imprisonment for older female offenders. Consequently, in reviewing existing research, we were sensitive in acknowledging the importance of age when it was made available. Another challenge in integrating the literature into our findings was analyzing the diverse methodological approaches previously used in creating a better understanding of the lives of women behind bars. While numerous qualitative studies used in-depth case studies, other studies focused on larger aggregate samples across a variety of topics. Regardless, every attempt was made to ground our research with previous research findings using a comprehensive overview for each topic presented.

A second means for gaining information for addressing some of the major gaps in knowledge regarding the effects of imprisonment on older offenders involved conducting an empirical study from a broad sample of participants. One advantage of using a quantitative approach is the capability to produce a preliminary profile of older incarcerated females. In the past, prison research has frequently relied on small non-representative samples, making generalizations literally impossible. A particular strength of this study is the fact it reaches across five states and provides an excellent database from which to provide a comprehensive picture of aging female offenders. Although the sample was not randomly drawn, we feel confident that a fair representation of this subgroup of prisoners was obtained, permitting some conclusive policy recommendations. With a robust sample of 327, this project provides the largest and most comprehensive study to date that examines older incarcerated women. This study will also provide the opportunity for direct comparisons between older women prisoners not only within the same state, but also between the participating states.

Finally, this study also utilized qualitative methods to explore and describe the unique prison experiences of older women. A series of focus groups were conducted in the majority of participating institutions. A cross-section of inmates from each prison was selected to gather

in-depth information on family and prison relationships, the transition into prison life, health-care access and medical-staff attitudes, dying in prison, reentry issues, and the role these issues contributed to overall prison adjustment. Using a semistructured interview guide, respondents were encouraged to talk openly about their prison experiences. Collecting personal narratives from the inmates was important in providing insights into the daily routine of prison life for each prison. In most cases, the research team was able to record the focus group conversations. However, other sessions were not taped due to the privacy concerns of the subjects. In the latter cases, detailed notes were taken. As is the case when conducting research in a prison setting, researchers must be flexible when issues such as space availability, time constraints, and inmate privacy are concerned.

Numerous open-ended questions also captured the personal accounts of the women's prison experiences. For example, participants were asked to describe, in their own words, the true value of the friends they have made while in prison. In addition, they were encouraged to discuss any changes they would like to see for improving health-care services, describe in detail what it is like being an older woman in prison, or share what fears and concerns they may have about growing old or dying in prison. Those inmates who reportedly were abused prior to imprisonment were also asked to describe episodes of abusive behavior, discuss problems of intervention, and provide detailed examples of injuries sustained as a victim. Follow-up questionnaires were also mailed to a cross-section of participants encouraging inmates to share their prison experiences on a variety of additional topics, such as visitation barriers, the importance of work, and their general strategies for coping with life in prison. Overall, the subjective data provided by the women in this sample are a useful tool in enhancing our understanding by viewing these events through their own personal lens.

### *Research Approach*

The self-report survey was long and detailed and covered a vast number of issues with important significance to older females. This portion of the study used existing instruments and quantitative analysis to explore the effects of various emotional, social, physical, and mental-health characteristics on inmate coping patterns and adjustment to prison life. Such variables included inmate support measures, Templer's Death Anxiety Scale (1970), and the Hopkins Symptom Checklist (1974) for anxiety, depression, somatization, and intrapersonal sensitivity. Other

measures of chronic and functional health; incidence of abuse prior to incarceration; engagement in prison activities, education, and work programs; and measures of family support and barriers preventing linkages with the outside world were also important variables central to this study. The closed-ended questionnaire included general demographic data including age, race, education, prior occupation, and marital status. Information on each inmate's criminal history was also solicited, including most recent crime committed, age when first incarcerated, length of imprisonment, and length of time remaining. Participants who responded yes to the question about whether they had been abused prior to incarceration were also asked to complete several additional questions. One portion of the victimization section included an intimate-partner violence inventory (Eliason, Taylor & Arndt, 2005). This measure included a series of statements measuring incidents of physical, verbal, social, and sexual abuse, as well as controlling threats.

### *The Research Setting*

Gaining access to potential study participants involved a lengthy process, especially when seeking approval in multiple states. According to standard procedure, we submitted a research proposal to each state's research and planning office (Arkansas, Mississippi, Kentucky, Georgia, and Tennessee). Chosen because of their contiguous proximity, we found that while similar, each state has its own unique organizational structure, application materials, and internal review process. Of particular interest to each state's Human Subjects Committee were issues of confidentiality and informed consent and the general objectives of the study, including an estimated timeline for completing the project. Once approval was received from each state, we submitted the proposal to the Middle Tennessee State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for final review. The IRB, as part of the screening process, consulted with a faculty member familiar with prison research to ensure proper guidelines were being followed. After receiving final university approval, each state research and planning division was notified in writing. At that time, the warden at each participating women's prison was notified by the state office of the pending research project, and we were told at that time to contact each warden or a designated contact person to make final arrangements for our site visits.

This research was conducted in seven women's prisons: Arkansas (Grimes Unit for Women, Newport), Central Mississippi Correctional Facility (Women's Unit, Pearl), Tennessee Prison for Women (Nashville),

Kentucky Correctional Institution for Women (Pee Wee Valley, Kentucky); the three Georgia facilities included Metro State Prison (Atlanta), Pulaski State Prison (Pulaski), and Arrendale State Prison (Alto). Several institutional consistencies exist between the facilities. With the exception of the Central Mississippi Correctional Facility, which also serves as a reception unit for the state, the other six prisons housed only female inmates. All are maximum security prisons in which guards are both male and female and inmates are subject to being viewed at all times. The facilities all provide set limits on meal times, out-of-cell times, hours of visitation, visitors, and wardrobe. The seven institutions all require co-pays for health care and restrict inmates to in-prison medical services for most treatment. All facilities, with the exception of Arkansas, require inmates to walk from one building to another for meals, sick call, laundry, or commissary products. Since the initial interview process, Arkansas has since built a new mental health structure for a handful of inmates that is located near the main facility. With the exception of the Metro State Prison in Georgia and the Tennessee Prison for Women in Nashville, all prisons are located in rather remote rural areas.

### *Interview Procedures*

The approach to inform inmates about the study varied from institution to institution. For example, in some instances prospective participants age 50 and over were contacted by prison staff via a personal notice that included a concise description of the project with stated research goals. Interested inmates were assigned a date and time corresponding with the researchers' visit. However, in the majority of cases, all inmates in the appropriate age category and with suitable mental health skills were brought to a general classroom or visitation area to meet with the research team. Potential participants were then informed about the research objectives of the study and were able to examine a copy of the research instrument including the consent form. All participation was voluntary, and a small number of eligible inmates chose not to participate. Other inmates were unable to participate due to work responsibilities, lockdown or death row status, or being confined to the infirmary. In most cases, the overwhelming majority of inmates at most institutions were more than willing to participate in the study. We received numerous comments from the women about how they felt "forgotten," and the majority were overjoyed that finally someone was interested in telling their story.

The first step in the research process was administering the 10-page survey questionnaire to all individuals agreeing to participate. A minimum of three research team members was always present during the actual data collection process. The research team provided assistance, as needed, particularly for those with visual, language, or literacy barriers. In those instances, researchers administered the questionnaire orally. On numerous occasions, inmates also helped others who needed any special attention completing the questionnaire. Once the survey was completed, small groups were formed as we transitioned into the focus group discussions. As mentioned earlier, not all inmates participated in this portion of the qualitative data gathering activity. On occasion, some women expressed the desire to speak to a member of the research team in private, while others felt more comfortable mailing their personal comments to us.

### *The Study Sample*

Participants for this study included 327 women ranging in age from 50 to 77, with a mean age of 55.4 years. Table 1.3 provides a comparative view of the sample showing the majority (56.6 percent) of the sample is white, 37.3 percent are black, and the remaining 2.8 percent are Hispanic, Native American, or “other.” One interesting factor when viewing the race category is the significant number of African Americans found in the Mississippi sample and the small number reported in Tennessee. About one-half of the total female population in Mississippi is reported as African American, so it appears there are a disproportionate number found among the older female population. Only 22.2 percent of participants reported being married. Among the others, 33.0 percent reported being divorced, 25.9 percent indicated that they were widowed, 8.3 percent stated that they were separated, and 10.5 percent reported never having been married. While there was consistency from state to state, Mississippi women were slightly more likely to have marked the separated or never married box. About two-thirds (65.5 percent) of the women reported having at least a high school degree, and 37.2 percent reported having some college education or a college degree. The smaller samples from Kentucky and Arkansas seemed slightly more likely to have attended college or received a college degree.

For 71 percent of the women, this was their first arrest leading to prison. The mean age of incarceration for this particular crime was 44 years with several women first imprisoned as early as 17 years of age

**Table 1.3 Demographic Profile of Older Female Offenders**

Characteristic	Total	Georgia (n = 145)	Tennessee (n = 60)	Kentucky (n = 28)	Mississippi (n = 71)	Arkansas (n = 23)
<i>Mean age</i>	55.4	54.8	56.1	54.8	55.0	57.0
<i>Marital status (%)</i>						
Married	22.2	20.3	23.3	21.4	24.3	26.1
Widowed	25.9	25.2	35.0	21.4	18.6	34.8
Divorced	33.0	37.8	30.0	39.3	27.1	21.7
Separated	8.3	5.6	5.0	7.1	17.1	8.7
Never married	10.5	11.2	6.7	10.7	12.9	8.7
<i>Race (%)</i>						
Caucasian	56.6	53.5	86.4	78.6	26.8	65.2
African American	37.3	38.9	8.5	21.4	67.6	26.1
Hispanic, Native American, or other	2.8	4.2	1.7	—	1.4	—
<i>Education (%)</i>						
8th grade or less	14.2	13.2	18.6	14.3	15.5	4.3
Some high school	20.3	20.8	16.9	10.7	29.6	8.7
High school graduate	28.3	27.1	37.3	17.9	23.9	39.1
Some college	24.9	23.6	22.0	46.4	21.1	26.1
College degree	12.3	15.3	5.1	10.7	9.9	21.7

while others committed their first offense in their 70s. The average length of time served for the current offense was 8.8 years, with the amount of time remaining to be served estimated at 17 years as reported by the inmates themselves. We removed those inmates serving life without parole, and for Arkansas the number of years left to serve for life is not formally established based on current sentencing policy. Of course, some inmates correlated their time left to be with their parole hearing, but some had realistic doubts that approval would be forthcoming.

Table 1.4 provides a summary of the criminal offenses for those participating in this study. Unlike women in younger age categories, older inmates were much more likely to be serving time for the violent crime of murder/manslaughter (41.3 percent) followed by drug-related offenses (25.1 percent). Since the sample from the Arkansas facility was chosen because of their life sentences, the overwhelming majority were serving time for capital murder. Tennessee and Georgia also had their fair share of women serving time for murder, while the samples from Mississippi and Kentucky were more likely to have committed drug offenses. A variety of other crimes are scattered throughout Table 1.4 with few other significant patterns.



**Table 1.4 Current Primary Crime Offenses (percentage; n = 327)**

Type of Offense	Total	Georgia	Kentucky	Tennessee	Mississippi	Arkansas
Murder/manslaughter	41.3	38.6	14.3	52.5	14.1	86.9
Assault/battery	5.9	9.1	7.1	5.1	4.1	4.3
Drug related	25.1	12.9	39.2	25.4	43.6	4.3
Theft	11.6	17.4	14.3	3.4	11.3	—
Fraud	8.5	—	3.6	5.1	16.9	—
Violation of parole	3.4	—	—	3.4	—	—
Conspiracy	3.2	—	3.6	1.7	4.2	—
Larceny	1.7	—	—	1.7	—	—
Sexual crimes	4.9	3.8	14.3	—	1.4	—
Vehicular violence	2.2	3.8	—	—	2.8	—
Burglary	2.8	—	—	—	2.8	—
Possession of firearms	4.3	—	—	—	—	4.3
Kidnapping	3.6	—	3.6	—	—	—
Other	7.7	13.6	—	1.7	—	—

**Book Overview**

This book is an attempt to begin the initial process of assembling a comprehensive perspective on a variety of issues facing older women in prison today. Although much has been written by way of books, chapters, and articles on incarcerated women, there has been only limited attention given to this unique group of older women with unforeseen special needs. The treatment needs of women are much different than for men, and certainly this is the case as we focus on women who are aging behind bars. As our society incurs such an enormous economic and social cost with so many mothers and grandmothers permanently locked away, acquiring a true picture of this tragic occurrence motivated us to write this book. Using a diverse approach with broad implications for the lives of these women, this book contains distinctive empirical information that provides an integration of aging issues with the field of corrections. While topics such as abuse within the confines of prison or the intimate relationships among inmates are not addressed, the issues chosen for this book are at the very heart of the lives of these aging women. The following paragraphs provide an overview of our effort to make a valuable and lasting contribution to the knowledge base of older incarcerated women.

Chapter 2 explores the relationships among aging, identity, and adjustment to prison life for women who come into the system marginal at best. Most inmates come to prison with few coping skills, having

shown poor judgment in dealing with life's choices. With tendencies toward accelerated aging due to a history of inadequate health care and abusive behaviors, prison only magnifies the problems that bring people to prison in the first place. Discussed in this chapter is the fact that prison produces significantly different experiences for older female offenders, including features of self-esteem, identity management, and social relationships with others. For many inmates, this is their first introduction to prison life, resulting in feelings of apprehensiveness, frustration, and fear as they personally process the consequences of their actions. The transition to prison is especially difficult for those who will likely find themselves behind bars for the remainder of their lives.

The chapter also stresses that not only must these mothers and grandmothers overcome the stigma associated with incarceration at a time when their families need them most, but they must also cope with the stigma of being a devalued older person behind bars. As they begin to notice the realities of aging and accept distinct reminders of their own mortalities, the women acknowledge the negative stigma associated with these changes. Without exception, older incarcerated women report a continual struggle to negotiate some of the same challenges their free-world counterparts undergo on a regular basis. Personal narratives indicate that this stigma is particularly blatant in prison where ageist attitudes are rampant among prison staff members. While ageist actions are often subtle, the perception of women in prison implies that older people are specifically disadvantaged or treated in a less than desirable way because of their age. This chapter demonstrates the fact that despite the rigidity of total institutions, such restrictive environments are important sites of socialization and identity construction.

Chapter 3 provides an extensive overview of the mental and physical health concerns and issues currently confronting older female offenders. A major focus involves issues related to health policy, health-care utilization, and costs of providing health care to an aging prison population. Using aggregate data from the participating sample, it is evident the health status of the older female inmates is usually worse than their counterparts outside prison. Incarcerated inmates tend to develop health issues much earlier due to their previous lifestyles and related socioeconomic factors resulting in a projected physiological age 10 years older than their actual age. Based on personal narratives provided by the women in this study, it appears a significant degree of health anxiety is present. Inmates express their fears as well as realities of the lack of adequate health-care service delivery found in a prison setting. The correctional systems we explored require inmates to pay between \$2 and

\$5 for a sick-call visit. Inmates report these fees can be insurmountable for sick, aging inmates who are less likely to have a source of income. We also address the importance of race and age in determining a comprehensive health plan.

As mandatory sentencing laws have become more popular in the past 20 years, inmates are spending longer periods of time incarcerated. According to Joan Petersilia (2003), a total of 16 states have abolished parole altogether, supporting the “truth in sentencing” policies. As a result, Chapter 3 also examines the increasing number of end-of-life issues as more prisoners spend their final years in prison. Previous research has found that institutionalization can be a valid predictor of death anxiety, and for many older individuals, the critical issue is not so much about death, but how and where the death will occur. A number of correlates of fear of dying in prison are examined in this study. Comments from inmates indicate that the prospect of dying in a foreign place in a dependent and undignified state is a very distressing thought. This chapter exposes the reality that older inmates must not only cope with their fears of getting sick and dying in prison, but also cope with frequent losses on the outside. The themes of dying in prison (fate, fear, stigma, and escape) are identified, as are coping strategies such as denial, religious activities, and acceptance. A number of important policy issues emerge as states are now including a number of end-of-life services to accommodate those who will spend their final years in prison.

Chapter 4 adds to the overall understanding of incarcerated mothers and grandmothers by stressing the importance of remaining in contact with family members on the outside. This connection provides older women the much needed assistance in adjusting to the pains of imprisonment. Benefits for maintaining family connections are identified, including the importance of family rituals, forms of financial assistance, and general encouragement to adopt prosocial behaviors. The important role that letter writing, telephone calls, and family visits play in maintaining family ties are documented with extensive inmate narratives. This chapter also points out that institutional control strictly regulates how frequently the prisoners can personally initiate family contact. These regulations can prove to be emotionally costly, as receiving word from home reassures inmates that relatives have not forgotten them and they will have a home where they can return after release.

While Chapter 4 documents the importance of maintaining family relationships for both prisoners and their families, numerous barriers are identified that frequently interfere with this desired outcome. Inmates

and their families frequently mentioned the issues of time, geographical distance, and money as problems restraining their contacts. In particular, aging inmates are often faced with unique problems such as aging family members who, due to health reasons, will have limited access to prison. Institutional barriers such as phone expenses and visitation restrictions are also important indicators in hindering connections to the outside. Despite the many barriers to maintaining family relationships, this chapter illustrates that the older women manage to find meaningful ways of parenting and grandparenting while behind bars. This chapter is filled with important implications for correctional officials who are called upon to identify policies that support the emotional attachment of older female inmates to their families.

Chapter 5 focuses on building a life in prison and the importance of various prison activities that serve to provide aging prisoners with “a home away from home.” This chapter is important because it introduces another significant stage in the progression of changes that occurs in the transformation to a total institution. During this stage of “learning the ropes,” the women begin to understand the social structure of prison, forming guidelines for shaping new social relationships. Frequently voiced by new prison arrivals are issues such as whom to trust and how to select friends or acquaintances. To cope with the physical isolation and severance of emotional ties with family and friends on the outside, inmates frequently turn to an inner circle of inmate friends for social support. This chapter documents the important exchanges of support that emerge between the women as they spend a significant portion of their life together. Prison friendships are important for older incarcerated females because they serve as a buffer against role losses and reduced social interaction with the outside world.

Chapter 5 also identifies how these women “do their time” by engaging in a variety of prison pastimes. How to cope with the boredom of prison life and unvarying schedules is an important feature of developing a successful strategy for coping with long-term incarceration. This chapter stresses the importance of work as a meaningful prison activity for the women who are capable. A prison job may not only provide limited monetary rewards, but also the social structure that creates a sense of normalcy in the women’s lives. The importance of religious activities and other prison programs are singled out as crucial elements in transforming the lives of older incarcerated women. Providing helpful assistance to fellow inmates by sharing personal items such as food or a bar of soap or simply making conversation are all important in creating a social world with meaning. This chapter provides important policy

implications, especially in responding to the everyday needs of women who will remain in prison indefinitely.

It has been well established that the majority of incarcerated women have experienced various incidences of abuse prior to their incarceration. However, we have few actual accounts of the past traumas that battered women bring to prison. Chapter 6 explores a wide range of abuse and battering experiences found among this group of older incarcerated women. The types of abuse identified in this study were categorized as verbal, physical, social, sexual, psychological, and controlling threats. The women explain that, as their abusive situations escalated, they attempted to leave abusive relationships, and many victims attempted to do so several times before they were able to leave permanently. Frequently fleeing for their lives, the women repeatedly tried to hide from their abuser, called the police and filed restraining orders, or turned to their family and friends as a means of seeking support.

This chapter documents not only the patterns of abusive behaviors, but also the frequent reluctance of family or authorities to come to their assistance. Also explored are not only the physical injuries received from battering incidents, but also the emotional consequences and mental anguish the women suffered, many from early childhood into later life. The factors contributing to specific abuse cases are helpful in understanding the destructive family backgrounds from which many of the women came. The posttraumatic stress symptoms identified in this subgroup reveal why these women have such difficulty in adjusting to prison life. The experiences relived in this chapter are important in understanding the total lives of this population. They help explain why these victims are so fragile mentally and why they frequently also become victims of the criminal justice system if neglected in prison.

As the numbers of lifers and older inmate populations have increased, there has been little attention given to the experiences of those aging inmates who are spending a major portion of their lives behind bars. The intent of Chapter 7 is to provide an intimate look into the life of one long-term inmate who is serving a 166-year conviction. Based on the extensive narrative provided by Judy Holbird, a Native American, the early portion of this chapter will trace her life beginning with early childhood, marriage as a teenager, and her criminal pathway leading to imprisonment. Her story is unique in that two of her children were also charged as accomplices to the crimes she committed. Of interest will be the sexual abuse she suffered as a child, the emotional abuse that was encountered in her marriage, and the financial struggles she faced prior to incarceration.

The latter sections will explore her transition into prison and the changes she has witnessed for more than 20 years. This lifer's adjustment to prison is typical of many inmates who struggle to accept their lengthy sentence by pushing back angrily at the criminal justice system. An emphasis is given to her efforts to remain an integral part of her family's life. In particular, the effective use of letter writing emerges as a key strategy in Judy's attempt to adjust to the consequences of incarceration. Her efforts to maintain her own health are also noteworthy, and her story leaves a measure of hope for those inmates seeking redemption.

Finally, Chapter 8 reviews some of the major concerns of older inmates as they consider reentry back into the free world. Important policy implications are provided in the discussion of the apprehension inmates feel due to a lack of preparation and training for a successful career, especially for those who are now old and have been isolated in prison for decades. Also discussed in this chapter are the challenges inmates face as they reunite with family members. Finding a suitable living arrangement is critical in a successful transition back to society and numerous inmates' narratives shed considerable light on this subject. Of course, some inmates' families have disengaged from those inmates serving life sentences, and in some cases, family members themselves are grown old, leaving few transition opportunities.

Given the fact that older female offenders often enter prison with high levels of anxiety, depression, apathy, and despair, it is imperative to identify and explore in further detail the recommendations these individuals would have for improving the state of their existing accommodations. Although the essence of this chapter will capture the voices of these older women as they suggest how their lives might be improved, it will also use a broader brush to address the important policy implications. Certainly, as the aging female prison population continues to grow at alarming rates, it will be imperative that correctional officials address the special needs of this population, including not only where they are housed and what they are fed, but also the multitude of mental and physical health concerns. This chapter will call attention to the fact that additional staff training is necessary as well as the implementation of new policies that serve to promote the health and wellness of this subgroup of inmates. An argument is made that, in the long run, these programs and policies will prove to be cost effective as more women are living out their lives behind bars.