

Women, Old Age and the Prison System

Azrini Wahidin examines the experiences of older females in prison and their related service requirements.

We are unaccustomed to thinking about elderly people as criminal offenders. Usually, when we hear about the elderly they are portrayed as the victims of crime, not its perpetrators. We are unlikely to associate elderly women with crime, or women in general with crime serious enough to result in prison sentences continuing into old age. Currently, the Home Office Prison Department for England and Wales has no overall policy or strategy for dealing with women who are in later life and in prison, despite having an Elderly Unit for men (Wahidin, 2002; HMCIP, 2001, HMCIP, 1997). Indeed, whilst there is a growing recognition of the female offender in criminological literature there has been a significant lack of attention paid to the experiences of ageing women behind bars (Wahidin, 2002). One problem confronting researchers in the field on both sides of the Atlantic is the definition. A review of the literature suggests that previous researchers have defined elderly inmates as anywhere from 50 (Aday, 2003) to 65 years of age and older. However, there is a growing consensus amongst correctional institutions in the States that the chronological age of 50 is used to define when one becomes an older offender.

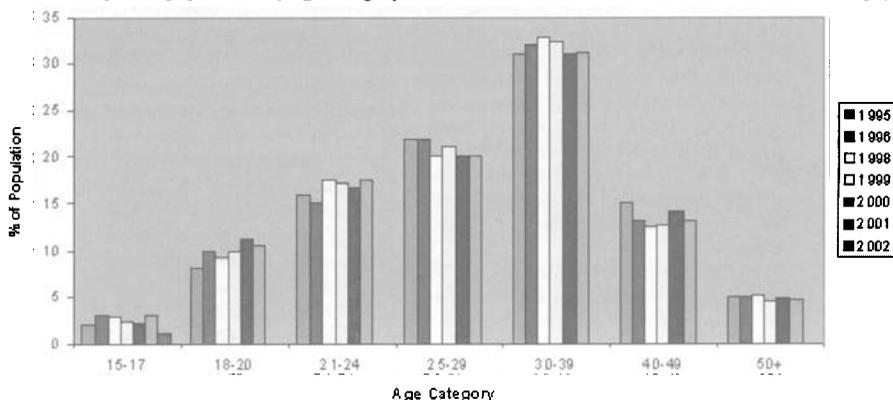
This article will show that some women in later life nevertheless do commit crimes; some are arrested; some are convicted; some are sent to prison; and some simply grow old in prison. The findings for this paper draw upon an extensive study examining the experiences of older females in prison and their related service requirements.

Facts and gaps

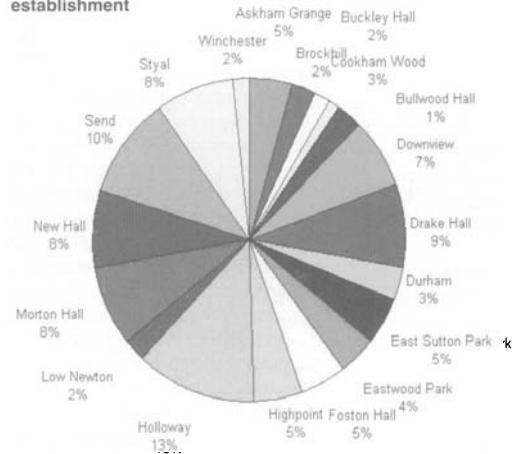
Women in prison form only a very small proportion of the total prison population, 5.2% (direct statistic from Home Office 2003, Wahidin 2002, 2003) and women over fifty represent only 4.6% of the total female prison estate.

From Graph 1 it can be seen that the underlying trend for the age demographics for females in the prison estate is to increase almost linearly towards the 'middle-age' ranges, then showing a steep decline into older age. The piechart in Graph 2 produced by the Home Office on May 18th 2003, illustrates the number of women over 50 against the establishment.

Graph 1: % female prison population by age category



Graph 2: Female prisoners over the age of 50 by establishment



Health care or the lack of it

Interviews with prisoners clearly revealed the predicament of the elderly in prison.

W.W*: "I'd kill myself, if I got ill. I'd have to depend on the prison to look after me. They [the prison officers] wouldn't look after you. You would just be left. I've seen a woman in here, she'd had a stroke and the inmates were pushing her around in a wheelchair. Her existence was reduced to a girl who would come and push her around in the wheelchair and one girl I believe started rubbing her hands with oil and massaging her. Otherwise, she would just be stuck over there in the hospital. (Pause) I'd rather be dead."

* (Names and places have been changed to ensure anonymity.)

Name: Wan-Nita Williams

Age: 55

Time Spent In Prison: 6 Years

While not all elders are in need of high levels of medical attention, others may suffer from chronic ill health; emphysema, arthritis, cardiac, hyper-tensive disorders, osteoporosis, cancer, stroke etc. Studies have shown that prisoners are physically, on

average, ten years older than their chronological ages (Anno, 1991).

The lack of appropriate knowledge regarding the needs of elders has resulted in abuse and neglect. Without the help of other prisoners who assist elders unable to live independently in prison, it is possible they would otherwise become forgotten and lost in the system.

Many elders complained at the unnecessary use of restraints when particular medical conditions prevented many from being physically able to abscond. Henrietta was recovering from a heart attack brought on by the stress of the trial. She found herself handcuffed and chained to two male officers. The measures of restraint used were excessive and inappropriate in relation to her medical condition:

H.H: "I was taken onto the coronary unit from the hospital. The family came in and I'm wired up and my daughter just burst into tears because I was handcuffed and chained to an officer. There were two officers sat at the foot of my bed."

Name: Henrietta Hall

Age: 66

Time Spent In Prison: 8 Years

The same woman not only had to contend with being placed in an open ward shackled to male officers but suffered from the lack of after-care provision.

H.H: "I was in a room for six weeks. I didn't get out for association, because there wasn't the staff. The windows were whitened up. The food was served through a hatch in the door. The canteen stuff was served through a hatch in the door. So you're stuck in this room for six weeks because you are ill and nobody will ever tell me that is justice. You'd take an animal out to exercise."

Name: Henrietta Hall

Age: 66

Time Spent In Prison: 8 Years

These two extracts demonstrate that due to the very nature of secure settings, elders suffering from age related illnesses are punished because of the lack of adequate facilities.

Physical environment

The absence of basic facilities, such as having a medical centre on site, ground floor rooms and adequate after-care provision, can compound the type of punishment elders experience (Wahidin, 2003). Although Wan-Nita was placed on the enhanced regime, where she had her own cell, she was then moved to a six-bedded dorm on the ground floor. Wan-Nita explains that:

W:W "I mean being enhanced here means absolutely nothing to me because I am in a medical room on the ground floor which is not an enhanced room. It is a shared room. It's a six bedded room."

Name: Wan-nita Williams

Age: 55

Time Spent In Prison: 6 Years

Although entitled to enhanced privileges, her medical condition and the lack of adequate ground floor facilities have meant that she has lost all her privileges.

Restoring to women some level of control and responsibility during their time in prison would at least give them direction

over their lives. This could be achieved by introducing independent advice centres in prisons, ensuring that the inmates had information about available benefits and access to legal resources, and by the continuation of National Insurance contributions whilst in prison. Furthermore, a network of halfway houses such as Transitional Prisons need to be established.

G.G: "They [the prison service] should have a plan of action for what they are going to do with older women. I suspect that no specific thought is given to people who are in this age category. It is given to other categories – they don't really think about people of our age group and our families. I appreciate we are a minority but I would say we are a significant minority."

(emphasis in original)

Name: Gwen Grangley

Age: 69

Time Spent In Prison: 8 Years

"Of course being an older person in jail you're in a bit like no man's land."

Name: Wan-nita Williams

Age: 52

Time Spent In Prison: 6 Years.

Elderly crime will undoubtedly increase in the years ahead as the elderly population grows. Implementing simple measures would at once make prison a less hostile and more accessible place – for example, installing doors and windows which could be opened easily, and radiators which they could adjust themselves; replacing the harshness of the prison corridors with appropriate non-slip carpet tiles; use of electricity plug points which would allow all elders the opportunity to listen to the radio; and replacing the glare of the strip light with something less harsh.

Unless the prison service recognises the elder offender, mistreatment and neglect will be an inherent and pervasive facet of prison life. For those elders who are already incarcerated as well as for those who are to be imprisoned, there must be clearly articulated policies addressing their special needs whilst in custody and as they prepare for release.

"This situation is not going to go away, as an analysis of awarded sentences shows, and I believe that it is one that the Prison Service must tackle. Again, humanity is the key word." (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales 1999: 37-38).

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