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ENC 1102

9 July 2020

Mass incarceration: The detrimental Impacts on Imprisoned Women

When it comes to discussing the corruption in the American justice system the only thing that society tends to focus on is the mass imprisonment of men. People go around demanding for reformation in the prison system for male incarceration, all the while completely disregarding the prevailing injustice being inflicted on imprisoned women. The common misconception that has been deeply rooted in society is that women have it easy therefore they don't receive treatment as harsh or vigorous as men. When in reality, female offenders are the ones being subject to a larger amount of immorality and exploitation while behind bars. Throughout history and even now a vast majority of the practices found in the American prison system are structured around gender disparities that showcase the bias towards male offenders. "The rising rate of female incarceration has been correlated with major changes in policy that produced a largely gender-neutral approach to criminal punishment. This 'gender-neutral' approach does not, however, treat women and men equally, but rather treats women as if they were men" (DeCourcy, 413). Despite this, no immediate actions are being made to overcome these androcentric practices in order to ensure that women are given equal opportunity. Females incarcerated face much more neglect than males because their numbers are increasing at a higher rate, women are left to deal with motherhood behind bars, and more women report suffering from mental, physical and sexual abuse while imprisoned.

Foremost, the fact that the number of women in the prison system is rising at an overly excessive rate proves the point that females incarcerated are subject to much more neglect as opposed to men. Efforts being made to lower the overall incarceration levels have reported having only been effective for men more than women. The women's population numbers have flared far worse to the point where they make up for any reductions in male incarceration. "Over the past 40 years, the entire United States penal population has grown at an unprecedented rate, and the rate of female incarceration is growing at twice the rate of men"(DeCourcy, 396). The standards being incorporated into criminal punishment allows for the constant inequitable and excessive outcomes for female offenders. Women are constantly being given lengthy prison sentences for low-level crimes and majority of the time it is female minorities that are being targeted for these offenses. Black women and other women of color are at the forefront of the increasing amount of females incarcerated. "They found that in states where larger percentages of the black than white population resided in urban areas, there were higher rates of black imprisonment and lower rates of white imprisonment" (Hiemer et al., 223). The fact that the consistent growth of females being imprisoned is mainly focused on a specific group of women showcases the blatant racism and systematic oppression practiced in the criminal justice system. Black women are the ones being the most negatively affected by the exclusion of females from the policies and laws that are meant to protect offenders from extreme unreasonable punishments. "...Black women were approximately 47.5 percent of female prisoners, whereas black men accounted for only 29 percent of imprisoned men" (Gross, 29). As opposed to men, women of color essentially dominates the increase of females in the prison population. Female imprisonment contributes to a large portion of the mass incarceration crisis prevalent in

American prisons. The over-incarceration of women highlights the sexism and racial injustice rooted in the criminal justice system.

Furthermore, imprisoned women face far more neglect than males because they have to face the struggles of motherhood while locked away in a toxic environment that is far from being family-friendly. As a result of the increase in female incarceration, women are much more likely to be separated from their families. It has been reported “61 percent of women in state prisons and 56 percent of those in federal facilities are parents of minor children. Among imprisoned mothers, 64 percent had lived with their children before going to prison; the corresponding figure for fathers was 47 percent” (Kilgore, 156). Women are being separated from their children at high concentrations and are forced to parent under low-quality circumstances. With them unable to properly take charge of the major parenting responsibilities that come with being a mother, female inmates are placed under the immense stress of not being present for their child(ren). “The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) shows that more than 60 percent of female prisoners were mothers to minor children and that about 150,000 American children currently have mothers in prison” (Turney and Wildeman, 1158). The justice system makes it impossible for mothers in prison to take care of their children and other family matters. Pregnant inmates commonly experience the most unethical treatment and practices while incarcerated. The lack of care and precision in which prison systems handle female gestation and birth showcases the dehumanization of pregnant women while kept imprisoned. “In the United States, incarcerated pregnant women are more likely to experience risk factors associated with unfavorable perinatal outcomes and inadequate prenatal care” (Matos, 3070). Maternal-fetal deaths trend in American prison systems as a result of the lack of necessary precautions and proper health care services

being implemented. Incarcerated pregnant women are vulnerable to high chances of complications and fatalities yet there has been no dedication in ensuring the protection and safety of all pregnant women in prison. The lack of understanding and empathy in the prison system for maternal figures and the damage that is being imposed on not only the lives of the inmates but also their children further demonstrates the abandonment that women are constantly exposed to while imprisoned.

In addition, compared to men much more women report having suffered from many more accounts of mental, physical, and sexual abuse established in the prison system. Due to the fact that the justice system disproportionately caters to male needs, no one is addressing the psychological issues acquired from trauma before and after prison among the female population. A large number of female inmates struggle from childhood trauma that consists of physical or sexual abuse. It has been reported that the “...estimates of the percentage of women in prison who have experienced violence, including rape, sexual assault, child abuse, and domestic violence before being incarcerated range from 40 to 85 percent” (Kilgore, 157). Unfortunately, these patterns of abuse continue in prison. Way too often female inmates become victims of sexual harassment by fellow prisoners and even correctional staff. “Recent national surveys in the U.S. estimate that 4% to 10% of prisoners experience sexual victimization during incarceration...State-specific studies estimate a higher percent of prisoners are victimized (20%–25%), with female prisoners reporting rates up to four times higher than their male counterparts” (Kubiak et al., 39). Across multiple studies, it is proven that correctional staff members perpetrate more than half of these incidents yet no justice or punishment is served for such immoral misconduct. The negative impacts that abuse has on the mental health of women

after experiencing these traumas are the cause of the normality of substance abuse in female prisons. “Female prisoners, both on remand and in prison, suffer poor mental health and substance abuse problems on a scale that is disproportionately larger than in male prisoners” (Koons-Witt and Crittenden, 78). Substance abuse directly correlates into the mental health issues of female offenders for the mere fact that it is the only coping mechanism they have in order to ensure their stability. The psychological damage being inflicted on female prisoners as a result of the physical and sexual abuse common in prisons showcases the maltreatment of women in the criminal justice system.

However, some may argue that males incarcerated go through just as much as females and experience the same level of neglect from the prison system. They believe that men do not receive any better treatment than women and are subject to the same hardships prevalent in female prisons. But, they are wrong because there is a substantial gap between the level of equality present between male and female offenders. What people fail to realize is that although men do face injustice and hardships in the prison system it is not as frequent or common as it is for women. Gender disparities in the justice system make it so women are disregarded and focuses solely on the structure of male imprisonment. “Whereas incarcerated men tend to come from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, the women tend to be even worse off. The literature on incarcerated women documents poor outcomes for the women...” (Butcher et al., 202). The criminal justice system has created an environment where female offenders are receiving harsher punishments at higher rates. The lack of representation for women imprisonment has standardized inequitable results for female offenders. Women are left with fewer resources to defend themselves, which results in them frequently having more counts for a

charge compared to what a male would receive. Contrary to popular belief, male imprisonment simply doesn't consist of the same imbalance prevailing in female incarceration.

In conclusion, imprisoned women are exposed to far more neglect than their male counterparts. Female incarceration is rapidly rising at higher rates, women are being separated from their children, and a large proportion of imprisoned women are victims of mental, physical, and sexual abuse. Instead of seeking reform for the unethical practices that are prevalent in female imprisonment, people choose to invalidate the issues of female incarceration to try to make it appear as though men in the prison system are the only ones in need of aid. The constant disregard for the mistreatment and exploitation of female inmates displays the gender inequality being incorporated into American prison systems. When discussing the mass incarceration crisis men should not be made the central focus. Female offenders are impacted just as much and should be equally represented in the justice system. Reform for imprisoned women should be a priority, not an afterthought.

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