



# **Women With Mental Illness in Prison**

## **Women and Crime**

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This paper will talk about mental illness within women prison and the issue of being a punitive sentence instead of rehabilitative. While we as society want the punishment to “fit the crime” but we need to be made aware that not everyone can adapt in a punitive environment and then when they’re released expected to “behave” and become “rehabilitated”. Many of these women have been punished harshly for non-violence offenses in an attempt to show society that we’re serious about cleaning up crime especially in the drug trade.

In general the number of mentally ill inmates in the U.S. prison have gone up over the years. There have been reports by more than half of prisons and inmates that show mental health problems such as depression, mania, and psychotic disorders. Women prisoners have a higher rate of mental health problems than men. Their incarceration can exacerbate their mental health condition because they are being forced apart from their family, especially those who have children.

In mid-2005, a U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) study estimated that nearly 75% of the female inmates in prisons and jails had mental health problems (James & Graze, 2006, p. 1). The DOJ research found that 12% of female inmates self-reported symptoms of mental health disorders, with 10% reporting symptoms of major depression, 2% reporting symptoms of manic disorders, and 3% reporting symptoms of psychotic disorders (p. 3). Of these female inmates, 23% reported that they had been diagnosed by a mental health professional with a mental disorder in the past 12 months, and 9% had stayed overnight in a mental health facility (p. 4). **(Lord)**

Many women enter the prison system with a myriad of mental illness as well as with significant mental health conditions. Their mental health issues would stem from substance and alcohol abuse; experienced trauma, being physically and sexually abused, as well as being homeless. They are already experiencing the harshness of their daily living existence so their coping mechanism may be to turn to crime, which land them in prison. Without appropriate medical treatment or intervention during their incarceration, these symptoms tend to worsen. Some of these women may have already been through a treatment program but without further support they tend to lapse back into their bad habits which can land them in jail. Most women who land in prison understand why they are there, accepted that they have done something wrong and need to be punished for it. They will go about serving their sentences while attempting to make change and coping with their environment, while inmate with mental illness do not even understand why they are in prison.

Most of them land in jail/prison for non-violence/property crime and if they're not given the correct treatment during their sentence they get released into society and relapse back into the same criminal behaviors, which becomes a vicious cycle. It's interesting to note: "In the 1800s, [Dorothea Dix led a campaign](#) against the imprisonment of the mentally ill, leading to far-reaching reforms and the establishment of mental hospitals. Now we as a society have, in effect, returned to the 1800s." (**Kristof**)

Once a women enter jail with her mental health issues she will find it difficult to comply to prison rules and the stress of coping with their confinement. What would happen is that

they would typically get into trouble like getting into fights – with either other inmates or prison staff, attempt suicide, become disillusioned. These behaviors put them on a more punitive path as they get put into isolation, which can decline their mental condition further. It has been reported that prison staff would punish them more severely by using their non-compliance as an excuse and take advantage of their mental vulnerability by sexually abusing them. Most of them have already been victimized prior to coming to prison now the process starts all over again and they're victimized within the prison system, this becomes a cycle they can't seem to break out of.

The prison system in some case doesn't have adequate funding for proper mental health services or the facilities, so the inmates are either under-treated or not treated at all.

“While the number of mentally ill inmates surges, prisons remain dangerous and damaging places for them,” said Jamie Fellner, director of Human Rights Watch's U.S. Program and co-author of a 2003 report, [“Ill-Equipped: U.S. Prisons and Offenders with Mental Illness.”](#) “Prisons are woefully ill-equipped for their current role as the nation's primary mental health facilities.” (Fellner)

The burden on the prison system in treating inmates with mental illness is due to some of the following:

- 1) Closing or downsizing of state run psychiatric hospitals
- 2) Lack of community support with appropriate staff to support
- 3) Lack of appropriate health insurance due to inmate's financial situation which limits their options to better services

We need to recognize some of the challenges in treating inmates with mental illness are:

**To determine whom and how to treat:** many of the inmates will try to hide their mental issues from prison staff or may not even know they have symptoms. “Prison staff must be trained to recognize the signs of serious mental disorders and substance abuse, monitor the entire prison population for signs of emerging problems, and distinguish acute and serious conditions from less serious ones. Knowing what types of treatment and programming are most effective and how to deliver services in a timely, humane, and efficient manner is also an ongoing challenge for prison authorities.” (Hills, Siegfried & Ickowitz)

**Managing inmate behavior and symptoms:** Inmates with illness such as major depression or bipolar may exhibit behavior that are irrational or aggressive. Those with paranoia will exhibit behaviors that limit their ability to relate or trust others. Whatever their mental health issues are it will affect their ability to comply and will have a disruptive effect in the prison environment. In order to address this issue the prison system need to invest in hiring more staff and set up specialized units to monitor those with mental issues safely and with respect. All correctional staff should have basic training in such as how to recognize symptoms of mental illness and suicide, the nature and side effects of their medications, mental health services that are available within prison and to utilize them appropriately.

**Recognizing the negative effect prison:** The prison system itself is already overcrowded and noisy coupled with the lack of privacy and other environment conditions that can exacerbate their mental health issues. The inmate may be cut off from

family/community ties because they are housed far from their families. Their vulnerability to be abuse by other inmates or themselves abusing other inmates will place them at a higher risk to be put into segregation or isolation. Being placed into isolation will increase symptoms for many inmates and cause psychological consequences. This put them at a disadvantage as it limit their access to resources they need to help them.

Why is providing mental health treatment in correctional system important?

- 1) To reduce the disabling effects of serious mental illness and maximize each inmate's ability to voluntarily participate in correctional programs.
- 2) To decrease needless human suffering caused by mental illness
- 3) To help keep prison staff, inmates, volunteers and visitors safe

**(Hills, Siegfried & Ickowitz)**

There need to be different areas of treatment that targets specific issues, because it's not a one size fit all. For example we need to have intensive specialized service addressing substance abuse, specialized treatment within the prison system and continued after care treatment in a community program when released. Staff should be trained in detecting relapse during treatment and also to help increase inmate motivation to stay sober. This can help in reducing recidivism. Specialized units for the purpose of caring for inmates with serious mental illness. This prevents inmates with mental illness from being around the general population, which they may not be able to cope, being victimized by the general population as well. Inmates will receive specialized treatment that meets their

needs. This in turn will help reduce rule violations, suicide attempts as well as other disciplinary issues.

## Word Cite

Lord, Elaine. *The Challenges of Mentally Ill Female Offenders in Prison*. Criminal Justice and Behavior. Retrieved April 27, 2014 from <http://cjb.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/35/8/928>

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