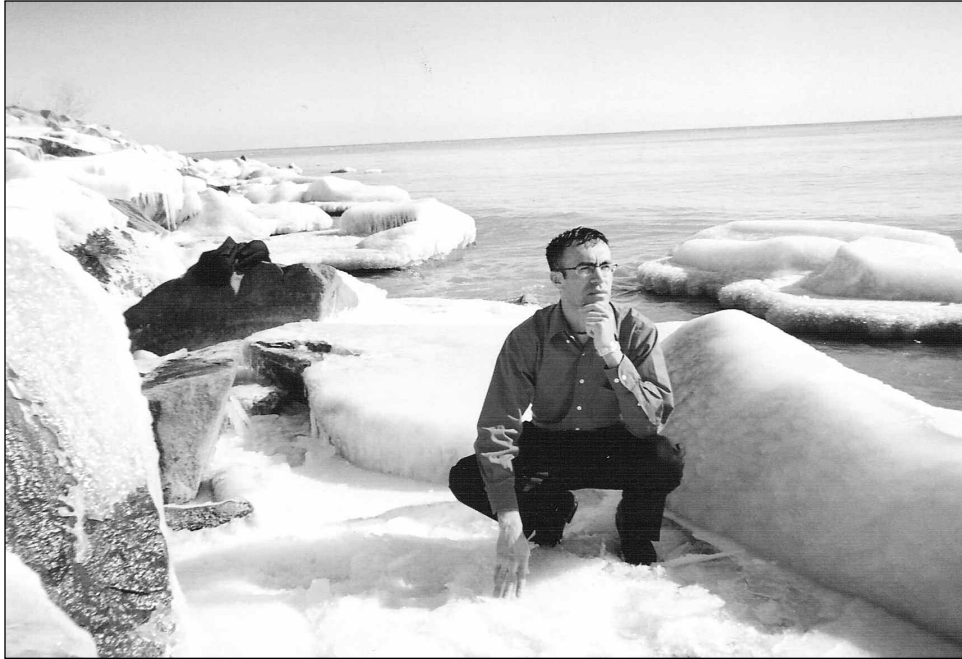


**A COMPREHENSIVE STUDY OF
FEMALE OFFENDERS**



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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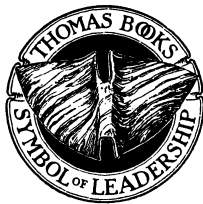
A COMPREHENSIVE STUDY OF FEMALE OFFENDERS

Life Before, During, and After Incarceration

By

MARTIN GUEVARA URBINA, PH.D.

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Por la gracia de los Dioses y las Diosas

Y

*El apoyo de aquellos que me han protegido y cobijado con tanto carino,
amor,
entusiasmo y respecto, he podido hacer realidad este proyecto academico
en el que deposito mi eterno amor y agradecimiento a ustedes
y espero que ustedes reciban en algun pequeno rincon
de su alma estas sencillas pero verdaderas palabras
de mi corazon y de mi alma!*

** * **

*Emily Suzanne Vermilya * Felipa Guevara Vertiz
Ustedes han sido mi bendicion!
-Martin "Nopalito"*

For the grace of God, the Gods, and the Goddesses

And

*The support of those who have protected and sheltered me with so much
affection, love,
enthusiasm, and respect, I have been able to make this academic project a
reality
in which I deposit my eternal love and gratitude to you
and I hope that you receive in some small corner
of your heart these simple but genuine words
of my heart and of my soul!*

** * **

*Emily Suzanne Vermilya * Felipa Guevara Vertiz
You have been my blessing!
-Martin "Nopalito"*

PREFACE

Historically, scholars have investigated many facets of the American correctional system. The focus, however, has been primarily on adult male inmates. In fact, until recently, few empirical studies focused on women in prison, in part because people assumed that there was little variation between the prison experience of male and female offenders. In the last few years, though, a number of studies have demonstrated that there are fundamental differences between male and female prisoners in a never constant penal system.

While the application of a more holistic and sound investigated approach has resulted in groundbreaking discoveries, the experiences of female offenders continue to be far less studied (*vis-à-vis* their male counterparts), resulting in a shortsighted profile of female offenders in the American penal system. Only a decade ago, Barbara Owen noted in her classic study, *In the Mix* (1998:viii), that even though the prison population for both women and men has soared since the 1970's,

[N]o American criminologist or sociologist has reported a full-length study of ethnographic research conducted in a women's prison. With the exception of journalist accounts of women's experiences in jails and prisons . . . and fictional accounts . . . there have been few academic, qualitative treatments of life in women's prisons.

Methodologically, existing studies generally fall into four categories: (1) the sample of participants is limited to a selected group of female inmates within a few facilities (normally one or two) and not the whole facility; (2) if entire facilities are selected, the sample is restricted to one or two state facilities and not the entire Department of Corrections; (3) studies tend to focus on African American and Caucasian inmates, giving little attention to other racial and ethnic groups, such as Latinas, Native Americans, and Hmong; and (4) in each case, studies tend to focus on specific issues such as safety or the relationship

between inmates and correctional officers. Consequently, there has been a need for more comprehensive studies of female offenders for three fundamental reasons: (1) imperative research gaps remain to be bridged; (2) the female prison experience is not constant; and (3) prison rates for female offenders, especially minority offenders, have increased considerably in the last few years.

Seeking to avoid a partial or distorted description of life behind bars, a central goal of this book, then, is to provide a balance to the existing literature and research on female prisoners in the United States and, to an extent, abroad, focusing primarily (but not exclusively) on female offenders and using data gathered from the Wisconsin Department of Corrections, which has undergone drastic institutional changes since we entered the twenty-first century in 2000. With the objective of providing a holistic profile of the typical female prisoner, this book utilizes a comprehensive investigative approach by equating the experience of female offenders by the totality of circumstances within an historical, institutional, political, and ideological context. Likewise, instead of focusing on a selected group of inmates based on demographic factors, such as race, ethnicity, age, or size, every Wisconsin female prisoner who wished to participate in the investigation was included in the study. The critical objective is to offer an inclusive analysis of the things that are considered by female inmates to be the most significant before, during, and after their incarceration, as a way of better understanding the reasons that led to their first incarceration as well as subsequent incarcerations.

In sum, this book provides an in-depth perspective of the simultaneous interaction of historical, structural, religious, cultural, political, and ideological factors that shape and reshape the experiences of women before, during, and after their incarceration. Understanding the many challenges facing female inmates requires an appreciation of the relationship between inmates, correctional officers, and, by extension, society. This undertaking should also be viewed as a call not only for the American society but the International community to openly and honestly discuss and, hopefully, resolve a social and historical issue that continues to be persistent and, in a sense, embarrassing in a modern, wealthy, and democratic society. Finally, as we process into the twenty-first century, our mission is to go beyond the question of race, ethnicity, color, class, gender, crime, and prison to a level of safety, efficiency, and universal justice by providing a series of policy recommendations throughout the book, particularly in the concluding chapter and the Epilogue.

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I also extend my gratitude to my research assistants who participated in the data-gathering process: Jesse Fritz, Melissa McKay, Azael Brodhead, Rachel Dobrauc, Maria Rentas-Rodriguez, Kathleen Salmon, Kurt Mauer, Meighan Flannigan, and Scott Canevit. These research assistants not only expressed a sincere interest in the project, but indicated having gained, in addition to a memorial experience, a better understanding and an appreciation for the study of female offenders. I would like to thank Gloria Brumley and David Schmidt who cheerfully worked late hours assisting with final details. Adding

more work to her tight schedule, Gloria Brumley insisted on getting things done to perfection, always with a polite smile and refreshing laugh.

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Mil gracias para Howard College for the analytical and emotional support. I am pleased and honored with the high level of professionalism, understanding, and compassion that I have received from my colleagues. In particular, I thank Doctor Cheryl Sparks, Terry Hansen, Doctor Amy Burchett, Doctor Jamie Park, Carol Hanes, Linda Conway, Javier Flores, Linda Keeney, Amber Buske, Cynthia Weeks, Erin MacKenzie, Julie Neal, and Cadet Bryant for their support and encouragement.

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Martin Guevara Urbina, Ph.D.
o simplemente, "Nopalito"

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**A COMPREHENSIVE STUDY OF
FEMALE OFFENDERS**

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The institutional experience of adult female offenders remains underresearched, and this chapter shows that certain significant research gaps remain to be bridged. Generally, criminologists and other investigators focus on documenting the overrepresentation of minorities throughout the American criminal justice system, but fail to analyze the prison experience by the totality of historical factors, events, issues, or circumstances. This kind of methodological approach is not, on its own, sufficient to fully capture the essence of institutional life. Instead, investigators need to place contemporary ideas, practices, and experiences in the context of the past and of broader ideas about gender, race, ethnicity, and the many factors that shape and reshape the prison experience. By providing an examination of prior prison investigations, explaining the format of the book, and briefly introducing the subsequent chapters, the author will demonstrate a new approach to the contemporary study of imprisonment.

THE NATURE OF PRIOR INVESTIGATIONS

Over the years scholars have investigated many facets of the U.S. correctional system. The focus, however, has been primarily on adult male inmates. In fact, until recently, few empirical studies focused on women in prison, in part because female offending was not defined as a significant social problem, and because some people assumed that there was little (or no) variation between male and female inmates (Belknap, 1996; Carlen, 1994; Rasche, 1974). In the last few years, though, a number of studies have not only demonstrated that there are significant differences between male and female prisoners, but that other significant issues have received little attention in academic literature, public discussion, and the media.

Several recent books have attempted to close these gaps in the empirical literature. Books which concentrate on adult female offenders include: Atwood (2000), Belknap (1996), Cook and Davies (1999), Girshick (1999), Kruttschnitt and Gartner (2004), Owen (1998), and Rierden (1997). Books which have focused upon the prison experiences of minority women include: Agozino (1997), Collins (1997), Díaz-Cotto (1996), and Mann (1993). Books focusing on the children of incarcerated parents include: Gabel and Johnston (1995), Seymour and Hairston (2001), Wright and Seymour (2000), and Travis and Waul (2003). Books documenting the historical development of punishment include: Myers (1998), Oshinsky (1997), and Ruddell (2004). Books describing the overrepresentation of minorities in the criminal justice system include: Beckett (1997), Mauer (1999), Miller (1996), Tonry (1995), and Urbina (2003a). Books that concentrate on the relationship between race and crime include: Hawkins (1998), Hudson (1996), Kennedy (1998), Messerschmidt (1997), Milovanovic and Schwartz (1999), and Urbina (2003a).

Although the relationship between prison, race, ethnicity, gender, and the complex multitude of intertwining factors varies from country to country, the widespread overrepresentation of minorities in penal systems everywhere suggests that ideas and perceptions of gender, race/ethnicity, and variation have become defining characteristics for prison systems (see Young, 2000; Zinn and Dill, 1994). Though, nowhere is this situation more apparent than in the U.S. where, for the first time in history, the penal population moved beyond two million in 1999. Of the total number of people incarcerated in U.S. state or federal correctional facilities, women constituted over 7 percent of the adult inmate population at the end of 2005. Since 1989, the numbers of African American prisoners have surpassed those of Caucasians, despite constituting only around 12.8 percent (38.3 million in 2006) of the general U.S. population. At the end of 2005, African Americans (non-Latinas/os) made up 39.5 percent and Latinas/os accounted for 20.2 percent of inmates sentenced to more than one year in prison. Currently, Latinas and Latinos constitute approximately 14.8 percent (44.2 million in 2006) of the total general population. Caucasians (non-Latinas/os), however, represented only 34.6 percent of inmates sentenced to more than one year in prison (Harrison and Beck, 2006; *Time*, 2006). In addition to these disproportionate numbers, minority women of all groups are filling the nation's prisons most rapidly of all racial and ethnic groups.

Thus, given the transformations that the correctional system undergoes to accommodate the new and additional demands of the inmate population, we argue that a comprehensive examination of female offenders will enhance our understanding of prison life in the U.S. Consider, for instance, the following issues. First, the prison system—as a whole—was originally designed to deal with the criminality of men (Maxey, 1986; Owen, 1998; Rierden, 1997; Rock, 1996). Therefore, given the increase of incarcerated women, female inmates confined to prisons are often enmeshed in a system that is ill-equipped to handle the specific needs of female offenders, the problems that brought them to prison and the challenges that women confront during their imprisonment. This rapid increase, for example, has affected the nature of the female prison population, the ways women serve their time, the delivery of programs and services, and the crowded conditions that affect housing, medical care, staffing, and security (Owen and Bloom, 1995a, 1995b). Oftentimes, however, critics fail to acknowledge that the correctional system is not only confronted with such increases, but with an extremely diverse and troubled population. Some policymakers do not realize that prisons are called on to deal with a set of complicated problems of women that society often ignores. The prison is then left to deal with the failures of society's local, state, and national institutions. People tend to expect too much from prisons and are frustrated and angry when a given situation is not remedied or solved cheaply and quickly. Second, investigators have claimed that some correctional systems have inadequate facilities to care for women with special needs—such as those who are pregnant or ill when they enter prison or become ill during their prison term (Schupak, 1986). Others are quick to note that the correctional system, at times working with limited resources, is faced with people who have numerous life-long problems (e.g., emotional and physical needs) when they enter prison. For instance, Andi Rierden (1997) suggests that social events (e.g., sexual and physical abuse) during childhood and/or adulthood influence a person's behavior. Barbara Owen (1998) and Lori Girshick (1999) claim that pre-prison experiences (i.e., histories of abuse, family and personal relationships, and economic marginality) affect the nature of women's response to prison. Similarly, Candace Kruttschnitt and Rosemary Gartner (2004) suggest that women's pre-sentence characteristics and experiences combined with the institutional environment in which they serve their sentence influence how they do their time in