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Rural Women’s Pathways to Crime: A Grounded Theory Study of Rural Women and their Experiences in Jails and Prisons

Angela Mesenburg
Cleveland State University, A.MESENBURG@csuohio.edu

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Rural Women Offenders: A grounded theory study of rural women and their experience with jails and prisons

By: Angela Mesenburg & Dana Hubbard*
*Cleveland State University, Cleveland, Ohio 44115

Introduction

In discussing the lack of research on female offenders, there is even less research on women incarcerated from rural areas. There is a lack of health services even more so in rural jails and prisons (Kane & DiBartolo, 2002). This creates hardships for women that need mental health and health services. Data shows rural incarcerated women having various physical and mental health issues, yet only the basic needs are met even that (Kane & DiBartolo, 2002). Rural areas are portrayed as peaceful areas and this perception contributes to the lack in crime research in these areas. Through the minimal research that has been done in rural areas, research shows that rural areas still have a substantial amount of criminal activity at certain periods of time throughout the years (Steiner, 1981). This research suggests more support is needed for women in the rural communities since there are lacks of opportunities and harsher sentences (Flanagan, 1997/1998). Our purpose in this article is to present grounded theory research on the experiences of rural women’s incarceration through the eyes of the women themselves. We discuss the programming available, health issues, and life prior to and after their life of crime/incarceration. We anticipate finding similarities between these women’s experiences and their hardships upon being released into the community. Our focus is to initiate a discussion that could eventually be a part of a design of programs to provide much needed assistance for the women in these rural areas.

Methods

Grounded theory is the qualitative data collection approach utilized in this article. There was an extensive literature review correlated with the open-ended interviews. We created a list of open-ended questions to guide us in our interview process. The idea was to gain knowledge of the women’s life experiences from their prospective. Throughout the interviewing process we began coding topics that repeatedly arose in our discussion. Through this process theories began to form on their own by acknowledging the similarities in these women’s life stories.

Sample

There were a total of 6 women interviewed in this study. Sue is a 55 year old Caucasian, Roberta is a 35 year old Caucasian, Amy is a 27 year old Caucasian, Jonelle is a 35 year old Caucasian, Sarah is a 28 year old Caucasian; Nicole is a 36-year-old Caucasian. Five out of the six women had experienced sexual, physical, or emotional abuse of some kind before adulthood. Five out of six women admitted to being a drug addict/abuser. Four out of six women have been in prison and six of the six women had been in jail. This tells us that 1. there is a high demand for programs in rural areas, 2. there is a label that is hard to change placed on women that go into the system in rural areas, 3. most women in rural areas have a hard time finding positive support systems, because everyone knows their business, and 4. women are forced back into their abusive situations due to lack of housing and public transportation in a rural area. There are major differences between rural and urban areas and most of the research available is focused on urban settings. We found a huge deficit in the research on incarcerated women, and even more so on rural incarcerated women.

Results and Discussion

This study revealed that rural women had childhood abuse that led to their feelings of not belonging throughout their childhoods, or not fitting into society’s norm as a young adult. Most of the women had a male counterpart who had introduced them into the world of drugs and eventually got them addicted. In most cases researched in this article, the women’s addiction to drugs/alcohol led to their criminal activity. These women expressed frustration with the reentry process due to lack of services provided for a successful reentry. The few women who were sentenced to a treatment center were sent over an hour away from friends and family making it difficult to correspond with children, friends, and family. Probation stipulations for these women were difficult to meet. One woman was on probation for theft, yet she could not have any drugs or alcohol in her house and had random house inspections. There is much needed research to be done in rural areas and we intend to continue our research in this area as well as expand to further rural areas in the U.S.

Summary

This study revealed that rural women had childhood abuse that led to their feelings of not belonging throughout their childhoods, or not fitting into society’s norm as a young adult. Most of the women had a male counterpart who had introduced them into the world of drugs and eventually got them addicted. In most cases researched in this article, the women’s addiction to drugs/alcohol led to their criminal activity. These women expressed frustration with the reentry process due to lack of services provided for a successful reentry. The few women who were sentenced to a treatment center were sent over an hour away from friends and family making it difficult to correspond with children, friends, and family. Probation stipulations for these women were difficult to meet. One woman was on probation for theft, yet she could not have any drugs or alcohol in her house and had random house inspections. There is much needed research to be done in rural areas and we intend to continue our research in this area as well as expand to further rural areas in the U.S.

Rural Women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Incarceration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sue 55</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Jail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy 27</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Jail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole 36</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roberta 35</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Jail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonelle 35</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah 28</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Jail</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sue discusses her experience with this rural community and her charges. She said, “This was my first offense and I was charged with a felony four for selling three grams of pot. I was sentenced to six months in jail, and three years probation when I was released. I was not allowed to even have alcohol in my house and they did house visits to make sure.”

Conclusion

Mental and physical health of women in rural areas will be researched further in a continuation of this research project. We will also be piggybacking off of the research completed in this project in order to explore the themes presented in this project. Eventually, we hope to compare the research on urban incarceration and our research on rural incarceration with women. Although in order to accomplish this goal we need to conduct far more research on rurally incarcerated women to compensate for the current deficit. There needs to be more women interviewed to gain a more sound theory and create themes that are consistent throughout our research process. We will be continuing this research over the next year to include more women and more themes.