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Women in prison: Investigating trajectories of institutional female misconduct ☆

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This study is the first to investigate the progression of serious disciplinary infractions among an imprisoned female sample. Findings from a trajectory analysis over a three-year time span revealed a three-class model with stable-limited, early-onset, and delayed-onset groups, clearly highlighting the heterogeneous nature of the female inmate population. After the classification of groups, a multinomial logistic regression was relied on to identify predictors of group membership relative to a group of "innocents" who had not committed any serious disciplinary infraction during the study period. Results from a multivariate analysis indicate that expected associations among predictors, such as age and mental health need, and disciplinary violations generally held for the rule-violating classes, especially the stable-limited group, which makes up the bulk of rule violators. These patterns and correlates are consistent with those identified in previous studies examining male inmates and pooled samples of male and female inmates.

1. Introduction

The Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that females constituted about 7% of the total prison population in 2015, with nearly 105,000 females serving a sentence of one year or more in state and federal prisons (Carson & Anderson, 2016). An expansive literature review of studies published between 1980 and 2013 investigating the causes and correlates of prison inmate misconduct revealed that only 20 out of 98 studies included female inmates (Steiner, Butler, & Ellison, 2014). Relatively fewer studies have specifically addressed differences in the predictors of institutional misconduct among females in comparison to male inmates (Camp, Gaes, Langan, & Saylor, 2003; Craddock, 1996; Faily & Roundtree, 1979; Harer & Langan, 2001; Steiner & Wooldredge, 2009).

While research on the correlates of maladjustment and factors influencing prison adjustment focus mainly on male inmates, these findings cannot unquestionably be generalized to females whose socialization and life experiences differ from men. Women have been shown to experience prison differently, and to utilize distinctive coping methods relative to men (Fox, 1992; Harer & Langan, 2001; Steiner & Wooldredge, 2009; Warren, 2003). Prior research has identified gender-specific differences between male and female inmates in

terms of pre-prison characteristics, prison adaptation strategies, and factors correlated with institutional transgressions and violence (Celinska & Sung, 2014; Craddock, 1996; Drury & DeLisi, 2010; Harer & Langan, 2001; Jiang & Winfree, 2006; Salisbury, Van Voorhis, & Spiropoulos, 2009; Skopp, Edens, & Ruiz, 2007; Wright, Salisbury, & Van Voorhis, 2007). Such findings suggest a greater need for understanding gender-specific influences on prison adaptation to more effectively meet the diverse needs of female inmates (Berg & DeLisi, 2006; Celinska & Sung, 2014; Craddock, 1996; Harer & Langan, 2001; Sorensen & Davis, 2011).

It is also the case that a small number of studies have addressed the heterogeneous nature of the prison population (Cihan, Davidson, & Sorensen, 2017; Cihan, Sorensen, & Chism, 2017; Cochran, 2012; Cochran & Mears, 2017; Morris, Carriaga, Diamond, Piquero, & Piquero, 2012). Although there have been advances in theoretical formulations and research surrounding the causes and correlates of institutional misconduct (Steiner et al., 2014), research examining the heterogeneous nature of female inmate populations is nonexistent. Using a previously unexplored sample of female inmates, the purpose of this study is to investigate patterns and correlates of misconduct among women in prison through the lens of trajectory analysis.

1.1. Gender differences in prison adaptation and misconduct

Most studies of inmate misconduct are derived from male samples or pooled groups of male and female inmates. The available studies examining gender differences in relation to prison misconduct provide contradictory and complex findings. Most studies have demonstrated that female inmates are less inclined to commit disciplinary infractions than males (Berg & DeLisi, 2006; Cao, Zhao, & Van Dine, 1997; Celinska & Sung, 2014; Craddock, 1996; Harer & Langan, 2001; Reidy, Sorensen, & Cunningham, 2012). However, other reports found that male and female patterns of inmate misconduct either do not differ or become more similar over time (Craddock, 1996; Drury & DeLisi, 2010; Tischler & Marquart, 1989). Relative to the type of infractions committed, gender differences emerged in other studies, with females committing less violent and less serious disciplinary offenses when compared to males (Berg & DeLisi, 2006; Celinska & Sung, 2014; Craddock, 1996; Harer & Langan, 2001; Sorensen & Davis, 2011).

Numerous studies reported gender differences significantly linked with inmate misconduct, including age, race/ethnicity, education, marital status, self-control, criminal history, length of sentence, offense type, substance abuse, and involvement in prison programs (Celinska & Sung, 2014; Drury & DeLisi, 2010; Gover, Perez, & Jennings, 2008; Harer & Langan, 2001; Jiang, 2005; Jiang & Winfree, 2006; Wolff, Blitz, Shi, Siegel, & Bachman, 2007). Studies have also demonstrated that prior exposure to sexual and physical trauma, the presence of mental disorders, dysfunctional relationships, and co-occurring mental health and substance abuse are associated with a higher probability of engaging in misconduct during imprisonment for both males and females (Celinska & Sung, 2014; DeLisi, Trulson, Marquart, Drury, & Kosloski, 2011; Greenfield & Snell, 1999; Houser, Belenko, & Brennan, 2012; Houser & Welsh, 2014; Houser & Belenko, 2015; James & Glaze, 2006; Jiang & Winfree, 2006; Salisbury et al., 2009; Steiner & Wooldredge, 2009; Wright et al., 2007). Female inmates, however, appear to be more severely impacted by these pre-incarceration factors in comparison to males (Greenfield & Snell, 1999; James & Glaze, 2006; Moloney, van der Bergh, & Moller, 2009; Salisbury et al., 2009; Steiner & Wooldredge, 2009; Wright et al., 2007).

These studies of gender differences in the prediction of institutional misconduct and violence provide little information about an inmate's progress during the course of a prison term. In response to this deficiency in the literature, the current study sought to isolate the developmental course of female misconduct to provide a more nuanced understanding of group heterogeneity and the correlates associated with serious prison misconduct among women in prison.

1.2. Developmental/life course importation model

Researchers have proposed various models to explain misconduct by prison inmates. These theoretical formulations focus on individual traits, life experiences, and institutional factors influencing inmate adjustment. Most notably, the importation and deprivation models provide the basic theoretical framework from which other theoretical formulations have emerged. Importation theory concentrates on the impact of individual traits and characteristics, beliefs, and experiences that accompany an inmate upon entrance to the prison environment (DeLisi et al., 2011; Hochstetler & DeLisi, 2005; Reidy et al., 2012; Sorensen & Davis, 2011). Deprivation theory proffers the view that the "pains of imprisonment" (Sykes, 1958) resulting from the harsh and restrictive features of confinement impact inmate adaptation to imprisonment (Blevins, Listwan, Cullen, & Jonson, 2010; Listwan, Sullivan, Agnew, Cullen, & Colvin, 2013; Morris et al., 2012).

Research, however, has shown that a single model cannot fully explain inmate misbehavior (e.g. Steiner et al., 2014), particularly in view of recent studies demonstrating heterogeneity in the inmate populations and distinct developmental patterns (Cihan, Davidson, et al., 2017; Cihan, Sorensen, et al., 2017; Cochran, 2012; Cochran & Mears,

2017; Morris et al., 2012). One perspective that could illuminate the diverse trajectories of inmate behavior is the developmental/life course model. This explanation hypothesizes that an individual's long-standing involvement in crime and violence is an essential element in the developmental life progression that is perpetuated in prison through serious institutional infractions, violence, and even prison homicide (Behnken, Caudill, Berg, Trulson, & DeLisi, 2011; DeLisi, 2005; DeLisi & Piquero, 2011; Drury & DeLisi, 2011; Reidy & Sorensen, 2017).

A growing body of literature links stability and change in developmental patterns of prison behavior with the developmental/life course perspective and criminal career research (Cihan, Davidson, et al., 2017; Cihan, Sorensen et al., 2017; Cochran, 2012; Cochran & Mears, 2017; Morris et al., 2012). This body of research has generally used advanced statistical techniques, specifically trajectory analyses, to examine longitudinal prison data. The empirical evidence from these few studies demonstrates the inmate population is not homogenous, and is comprised of different groups based on their pattern of disciplinary misconduct over time.

1.3. Trajectory patterns of inmate misconduct

Cochran (2012) conducted one of the earliest studies demonstrating heterogeneity in a mixed group of male and female inmates through the use of trajectory analysis. Sampled inmates had been imprisoned for felony offenses during a 12-month period in the Florida prison system. Although the focus of the study was on the relationship between visitation and misconduct, the author identified three trajectory groups based on the number of disciplinary infractions incurred during each month of the study. The largest group contained the majority of inmates (69%), which committed no infractions. The remaining two trajectories showed inverted U-shape patterns with misconducts peaking at the 5 to 7 month intervals. The flatter curve belonged to a group with a low level of misconduct, representing 26% of inmates in the sample. The steeper curve belonged to a small number of inmates (5%) who committed a high level of misconduct.

The heterogeneity of prisoners was also evident in a study of violent misconduct by Morris et al. (2012) that identified three distinct trajectories (onset-limited class, delayed-onset, and chronic) among a sample of > 6000 male inmates over a three-year observation period. The chronic class was involved in misconduct to much greater extent than the other two groups. The delay-onset limited class initially showed a low level of misconduct at the outset, but increased before leveling off at a steady rate of misbehavior. In contrast, the early-onset group initially displayed misconduct similar to the chronic group before dropping to a level of misconduct below that of the other two groups. All three groups showed a gradual decline in misconduct over time but never fully abated.

Cochran and Mears (2017), using a large pooled sample of male and female inmates convicted of felonies, identified five distinct patterns of inmate behavior (non-misconduct, de-escalating, and low, medium, and high/escalating) based on the extent of involvement in all forms of inmate misconduct observed over the course of an inmates' prison term. Infractions were measured in separate cohorts at two-month time intervals starting at 12 months and extending to 20 months. Three of the five trajectories (non-misconduct, low, medium) depicted a consistent pattern of misconduct at different levels. The escalating group showed a high or increasing level of violations; this group also had somewhat higher percentages of violent offenders than the non-misconduct group. The de-escalating group showed high initial rates of misconduct upon entry to prison, but desisted from further infractions as their prison term progressed.

A recent study conducted by Cihan, Davidson, et al. (2017), using a large sample of inmates serving at least three years, identified five different developmental patterns of inmate misconduct (stable-limited, high early-onset, low early-onset, chronic, and delayed-onset) based on the frequency of occurrence. Correlates of group membership included