
Ronald Aday and Jennifer Krabill have written a thorough, insightful, and engaging book on women aging in prison. It is a topic that, until fairly recently, would not require the extended and thoughtful discussion it receives in this fine book because there were comparatively few women in prison and even fewer older female inmates. Today, however, the topic is timely, compelling, and more than a little saddening. The authors do justice to this difficult subject, bringing to bear extensive original research, compelling focus group discussions and interviews, and thorough reviews of the extant literature. It is safe to say that this is the definitive book on its subject.

The number of women in U.S. prisons has increased steadily, even dramatically, over the past 30 years, growing at a much faster rate than that of men and this during a time of considerable growth in the population of male prisoners. In 1977, the United States imprisoned 24 male prisoners for every female inmate. By 2007, the rate
fell to 13 men to every woman. Older people, male and female, are committing more serious crimes, or we are taking their crimes more seriously, and so more offenders are at greater risk of growing old and dying in prison in their declining years. It is as if the tattered American social safety net has been held over prisons and shaken out, the better to fill these penal repositories with people who have little going for them and, at best, the prospect of limited lives behind bars.

Aging is not for the faint of heart, especially in prison, and especially so for the sorts of people—the sick, abused, drug, and alcohol addicted—whose often-reckless lives land them behind bars. Complications associated with aging are accelerated in prison. When one considers the unhealthy lifestyles, illnesses, and traumas common among aging female prisoners, one begins to appreciate why the rigors of confinement are especially demanding for these offenders. They get sick at high rates, at least in part in response to the stresses of imprisonment, and this requires expensive care, at a time of increasingly strained state budgets. It is telling that a 50-year-old inmate is considered elderly, the equivalent, on a good day, of a 60-year-old civilian. Ten years lost at that late date in the life span and in the context of prison is a long, long time. Extrapolated over the growing population of aging women prisoners, we see a massive loss of life in the making.

The authors cover several key aspects of incarceration, beginning with aging and prison adjustment. We learn that prison magnifies the problems that bring people to prison in the first place. Entering prison is especially hard for those who will likely find themselves in prison for the rest of their lives. One problem is stigma; prisoners, and perhaps especially elderly prisoners, are devalued, seen as spoiled goods. Prejudices flourish in prison, and age bias is no exception. Elderly prisoners are not seen as purveyors of wisdom or even products of sad stories that would garner empathy, though some of the stories in this book are heartbreaking. A sizable number of these older women are new to crime and hence new to prison. They are shocked by their incarceration, and in a sense, the prison is shocked by them, and so the institution responds to them with denial. What prison official, line or brass, wants to think of their life’s work as locking up grandmothers or, for that matter, what inmate contemplates the exploitation of the grandmother in the cell next door. Certainly, many older female prisoners are naive fodder for the cold prison community. As one elderly woman said, plaintively, “I’d never been in jail before. I’d never been to court before. I’d never been locked up before . . . I’d never met people who kill people. I was foolish. I didn’t know anything about the system. I came into it—I walked into all of it.”

Women as they age in prison appear to show salient concerns for their health, which is often compromised by imprisonment. Many are notably depressed about their lives to date and the lives that are likely to unfold over the course of their confinement. Health concerns further constrict the limited life that imprisonment offers them. The cold treatment often provided by prison health care systems magnifies a sense of loss and adds to fear of health complications as they age. Prisons are marked by limited budgets and limited compassion. As one woman observed, “Occasionally, we will run into a nurse who will just tell us the truth . . . ‘Honey, they’re not going to do that because it costs too much money.’ . . . you feel like the prison system is dealing in dollars and cents, and that’s all the hell you are is a commodity.” One’s status as a low-value commodity adds to the fear that staff will make mistakes or fail to notice medical problems that could be prevented, fears that often are justified. The thought of dying in prison induces shame and fear, burdens added to the daily round of prison life.

Women perhaps more than men value and try to sustain connections to the free world. Women stress the importance of remaining in contact with family members outside prison as a way to sustain themselves in the face of the stresses of prison life. Letter writing, phone calls, and family visits play important roles in maintaining family relationships. Most women feel generally well supported by their friends and family, but aging inmates have the shared problem of having aging family members, which offers the possibility of one day facing confinement on one’s own. And as a general matter, the passage of time diminishes the frequency of contact with family, producing growing feelings of loneliness and hopelessness about the future. Visits, the ultimate lifeline, can also be stressful, especially when one’s family members are old, and each visit may be their last. Moreover, arbitrary institutional rules limiting or prohibiting personal contact are a source of great unhappiness for older women. As one woman observed, “Families are put through a real battle before they ever walk through the door. Even for just a brief visit . . . they’re going to get patted searched . . . You have to have a guard sit with you during visits. You cannot hold family members . . . . Sometimes you may want to wipe a tear, but you
cannot do that.” Institutional restrictions are seen as trivializing the substantial suffering these women experience. For older women, there is the special hurt caused by the fact that they cannot be grandmothers to their grandchildren, something many associate with having lived a successful life.

Ultimately, prisoners must make a life for themselves behind bars, ideally developing a “home away from home,” even if this ersatz home is replete with cells and bars and an often-treacherous social world. For most women, finding trustworthy fellow prisoners with whom to connect is the touchstone of their adjustment. Friends may be hard to find, but friends found are deeply valued. For long-termers, the ties of friendship are the ties that bind them together as whole human beings with a social identity that resonates with the world outside as they lived it or as they wish to have lived it: “A close friend here is like having extended family . . . Without these friends, prison would be unbearable . . . They are someone to depend on at all times.” The institution, with its rigid routines, offers a structure to the day, but relationships give that structure meaning. These relationships offer a round of daily life many women find worth living, as artfully illustrated in a sensitive case study that comprises an entire chapter of the book.

The downside to the ways prison gives structure to lives is the problem of abuse, which is endemic in the women’s pre-prison lives and seems to percolate just below the surface of daily prison life as well. The path of least resistance may well be to play out in daily prison life the histories of abuse so common among prisoners, who have been traumatized and, as a result, are likely to form abusive, if well intended, relations with other prisoners. Johnson (2007) develops this theme in a short story called “Cell Buddy,” which explores the hidden dimensions of domestic violence as they often unfold in the cell, the domestic unit of the prison, replicating and even extending the abuse that characterizes just below the surface of daily prison life, such as on the ground level of cell blocks and on the bottom bunks in dormitories. A simple thing like a comfortable mattress and adequate blankets and pillows can go a long way toward making the older woman feel cared for. (This may be true of younger women and indeed of male prisoners. One of the main complaints we have heard about the quality of life in men’s prisons is thin, plastic-lined mattresses that are uncomfortable and noisy, offering daily proof that one’s comfort is no concern to one’s keepers.)

Staff members should be encouraged to listen to the concerns voiced by older adults. In civil society, we normally are more accommodating of older people. We see no reason why such civility cannot be introduced into prisons and no need to maintain the same rigid policies that are often products of misplaced concern for the personal safety of staff, who presumably are at reduced risk among the old and infirm. It is often the minutia of daily life that exemplifies the challenges older women face in prison—making the most of long hours of empty yard and recreation time, standing in long lines for meals of limited appeal. These challenges are made worse by policies that restrict the assistance inmates may provide to each other. George (2010) reports that women in her prison cannot touch or share food with one another, for fear that activities will lead to sexual abuse. The result is that women may be forced to stand idly by as they watch their friends struggle to perform their chores, climb to the top bunk of their bed, or simply have to make do with the limited commissary food items they can afford but which friends would be happy to supplement. These problems may not be easily perceptible without
the insight provided by women firsthand, which the authors expertly wove throughout their book.

Older offenders might be thought of as a human resource for one another. Elders often are looking for ways to be useful. Surely their long years of experience can translate into helpful informal relations, perhaps under the guidance of staff who might be encouraged to take more risks with this population. By the same token, some policies, such as standard chore rotations, may be unnecessary and even cruel burdens for elder offenders. Ideally, the development of special geriatric facilities would help ensure older women have access to needed programing and services. In addition to assisting with medical needs, these facilities would help administrators recognize and respond to women’s programing needs and desires for socialization. As demonstrated through the authors’ interviews, women often find it difficult to connect with their younger counterparts. Although some enjoy assuming a mentor position with younger women, others enjoy the rapport, friendship, and interests they share with other women of their age.

It is sobering to think that, out of a concern for humaneness, we might one day point to an archipelago of institutions for the elderly offender, including extensive hospice programs. Likewise, it is distressing to consider that mixing elderly women with other offenders might make their later years a special torment. Dante did not have a circle of hell for such suffering, but perhaps a modern artist of similar sensibilities, on reading Aday and Krabill’s work, would find one in penal systems full to surfeit with older female prisoners trying, against the odds, to live out their years in dignity.

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doi:10.1093/geront/gnr114