

Paper Session D1: High Risk Issues in Women's Health

Community Pattern Recognition with Incarcerated Women

Margaret Oot Hayes, PhD, RN, Regis College, Weston, MA

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to gain insights into the lives of incarcerated women. There is a paucity of knowledge regarding the needs and experiences of women in prison and the results of this study could be used to advocate for gender-responsive treatment of female inmates.

Background: The number of women in prison has increased by over 700 percent since 1977. The number of women in prison has grown 48% since 1995, resulting in a total of 106,174 women in prison or jail. The risk assessments and treatment of women in prison has recently been recognized as failing to take the unique needs of women offenders into consideration, such as previous traumas, relationships, children, and self-esteem.

Methods: A hermeneutic, dialectic method as designed by Margaret Newman was used to conduct in-depth interviews with 18 incarcerated women. The diagrammatic patterns were analyzed for commonalities. Three focus groups were held with both participants and non-participants for validation of the findings.

Results: The women described a lifetime that began with childhood traumas and family issues that paved their pathway to prison. There were many gaps in the women's descriptions of their late childhood years that they attributed to either not realizing their life experiences were abnormal or that they blocked out their traumatic early childhood experiences. This in turn led to substance abuse, mental illness, school problems, poor decision-making, and abusive relationships. The spiral continued downward until they ended up in prison. The prison experience itself was a bit of a dichotomy whereby many women felt it was a chance to learn from their past mistakes and others felt their prison experience only made matters worse.

Conclusions and Implications: One of the most interesting findings was the perception that lives filled with abuse and neglect were perceived by many of the women as normal. They felt that the interviews and focus groups were one of the best interventions that they have had in prison because it is against prison protocol to address past traumas in counseling; and it offered them the opportunity to explore their past and gain insights into why they ended up in prison, as well as make better decisions in the future. The implications from this study support the more recent acknowledgment that women in prison need gender-response treatment.