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EXPLORATION OF DEMOGRAPHICS AMONG INCARCERATED WOMEN IN THAILAND

Abstract:

The number of female prisoners is increasing worldwide. In November 2009 the Thai government developed a set of 70 rules addressing the specific needs of women in the criminal justice system. This included rules relating to the treatment of female prisoners. Many of the issues addressed within this context became the foundation for the United Nations Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders “Bangkok Rules” which was adopted by the UN in December 2010. These landmark agreements were the result of many individuals and organizations efforts to improve the penal system and its’ treatment of female offenders. Furthering on these developments, this paper summarizes an exploratory research survey carried out at 4 female prisons in Thailand as well as the results of a survey distributed by the Ministry of Justice to women’s prisons in Thailand. This is a socio-demographic investigation of the variables associated with female prisoners. Further comparative analysis of specific variables will be analyzed to identify meaningful correlations among variables. This paper will discuss some of the commonalities of global prison demographics and discuss some of the ethical issues involved with conducting research in a prison. There are no specific suggestions made for policy or budgetary actions.

Keywords:

Female Inmates, Prisons, Demographics, Thailand

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Background

Thailand has the world's fourth largest female prison population behind the United States, China, and Russia. In November 2009 the Thai government developed a set of 70 rules addressing the specific needs of women in the criminal justice system. This included rules relating to the treatment of female prisoners. Many of the issues addressed within this context became the foundation for the United Nations Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders "Bangkok Rules" which was adopted by the UN in December 2010. These landmark agreements were the result of many individuals and organizations efforts to improve the penal system and its' treatment of female offenders. One particularly committed and influential force behind these agreements was Princess Bajrakitiyabha who founded the Kamlangjai project.

Princess Bajrakitiyabha has brought this issue to the public light and has been instrumental in generating both public and private support for female prison reform. She has worked with the Thai Red Cross improving the quality of education and services offered to female inmates and their babies and providing necessities for new born children such as milk bottles and diapers. Princess Bajrakitiyabha continued her efforts to support this needy and deserving group by working with the Rutnin-Gimbel Laser Eye Center which distributed hundreds of pairs of eye glasses as well as offering cataract and pterygium surgery. Following the success of these programs private donations began to support the cause and more consideration has been given to vocational training of female prisoners.

With the support of Princess Bajrakitiyabha and the Director General of the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) in Thailand, Khun Vitaya Suriyawong, the MOJ has established the "ELFI" (Enhancing the Life of Female Inmates) project which strives to improve the quality of services available to female inmates and create an environment which reduces recidivism by adopting the United Nations Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders.

This exploratory demographic survey is intended to identify select attributes, characteristics and behavior patterns or life experiences which are shared among female inmates at unusually high frequency. These characteristics will be compared and

analyzed to ascertain and clearly recognize unique correlations among the Thai female prison population.

Important Issues

The overall lack of awareness among the public to gender-sensitive issues such as female incarceration creates barriers to galvanizing the social and political support necessary to improve the treatment of prisoners. This exploratory demographic survey is a first step in discovering the factors which were present in the lives of women who became inmates. For example, violence against women has “specific implications for women’s contact with the criminal justice system” (U.N. General Assembly, 2010, p. 8). Many previous studies have shown that many incarcerated women were victims of sexual and physical abuse. Other studies have stated that the majority of female prison inmates were arrested for non-violent drug offenses and were mothers who did not pose serious threat to society. When women are involved in violent crime it is often committed in an act of self defense wherein they target their husband or partner who has been physically or sexually abusing the women (Pollack, 1997). This study also seeks to determine approximately what percentage of the female prison inmates have children as other studies have concluded that children of offenders are far more likely to become offenders themselves (Simmons, 2000).

It is important to analyze the factors which are involved in the female prisoners’ background, behavior and lifestyle to determine how these are involved in women’s criminal offenses (Covington, 2002). In various studies of female prison population demographics it has been shown that female prisoners are mostly young, poor, uneducated and have a history of trauma and substance abuse (Merlo and Pollack, 2006). Many of the women in prisons the world over have high rates of victimization and physical or sexual abuse (Bloom, Chesney-Lind and Owen, 1994). It is worthy to note that the high rate of physical and sexual abuse is a predictor for substance abuse. Substance abuse is also correlated with imprisonment in unusually high numbers among women.

Operating on the belief that policy makers and the general public deserve to know what kinds of environmental, social and economic forces are positively correlated with criminal activity, this research was designed as an introductory analysis of prison demographics so as to identify specific variables common among female inmates in Thailand. By raising awareness of this issue it is our hope that the legislative and budgetary decision makers will begin to explore methods of improving educational opportunities, vocational training opportunities and developing gender specific programs and institutional support. Prior to raising awareness it is necessary to learn about the subject and challenge stereotypes by gathering data from the specific group we intend to assist.

Other areas of consideration in this survey include but are not limited to employment, educational background, previous offenses, duration of incarceration, family relationships

and inmates' opinion of vocational training. For a full sample of the survey please refer to the Appendix 3.

Methodology

A survey measuring thirty seven variables was distributed by the Ministry of Justice to select female prisons in Thailand. Recent statistics provided by the MOJ stated that approximately 24,000 women are incarcerated in Thailand. This survey seeks a minimum 10% sample size which calls for at least 2,400 completed surveys. Expecting a completed survey ratio of approximately 50%, roughly 5,000 surveys were distributed among the female prison population. Due to the support of the Ministry of Justice nearly 4,800 surveys were returned to this researcher. Of those surveys returned 4507 or roughly 19% of the female prison population were input into SPSS for analysis.

Data Results

Age and Nationality

The vast majority of female inmates (74.1%) are between 21 and 39 years of age. While only 4.4% are less than 20 years of age, almost 40% are less than 30 years old which supports the notion that many female inmates are primarily young women. Almost all (94.1%) are Thai nationals.

Family and Violence

In regard to marital status, there was no indication or predictor of significance. Single women and married women are almost equally represented among the prison population (31.1% and 31.4% respectively). While the majority of female inmates do have children, 48.6% have either one or two children, the percentage without children (22.6%) does not make child rearing a major predictor of incarceration. 55.8% reported having 3-5 people in their family which is within the normal range in Thailand. The majority of inmates reported having a close or very close relationship to both their mother and their father (92.7% and 86.9% respectively).

93.9% of the women reported never being sexually abused. 87.8% reported never being physically abused. 83.1% reported never having witnessed any abuse in their homes and only 15.5% reported using violence against others. The vast majority had never been homeless or forced to live on the streets.

Income and Education

Perhaps the most interesting data coming from this research is in regard to the income and education levels of female prisoners. Indeed, a very low income and low educational attainment was reported. This research also explored family income per month and the results are as follows: 28.6% of the families earned less than 5,000 baht

per month, 24.8% earned between 5,000 and 7,000 Baht and an additional 18.7% earned less than 10,000 Baht. Taking into account the average family size is 3-5 people and comparing this with the average family incomes from this research with data from the National Statistics Office, we can conclude that Thai women in prisons generally come from families of low socioeconomic status. Thus poverty is an indicator of potential for imprisonment. Another interesting aspect of this research is in regard to education levels. Almost 60% of those surveyed had not completed high school, additionally, only 5.4% had completed a bachelor's degree. Therefore, it is this researchers' conclusion that poverty and low educational attainment are positively correlated with potential for incarceration in Thailand.

Substance Use

72% of the respondents reported drinking alcohol although most (40.7%) drank only on holidays or during special events. Amphetamine was the most commonly reported stimulant with 47.5% use among respondents followed by tobacco (21.3%). Marijuana, often considered a gateway drug was reportedly used by 22.6%. Although the vast majority of inmates were incarcerated for drug related offenses (80%) only 14.5% considered themselves addicted and only 2% of inmates reportedly committed the offense under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

Employment

Most inmates were employed full time during the month of their arrest and are visited often by their family.

Arrest Record and Sentencing:

Almost 85% reported that this was their first arrest and nearly 74% reported having been incarcerated for less than two years. This data coupled with conversations with prison staff during the data collection and prison visitation phase suggests that many women are given short sentences for first time convictions of possession and/or distribution of small quantities of amphetamines. During interviews with prison officials, it was stated that rarely is probation given to small quantity drug possession charges, rather local judicial practice favored short sentence imprisonment. Indeed, almost 80% of the prisoners reported being charged with drug related offenses, the most common of which was amphetamine.

Vocational Training and Importance

Over 80% of the respondents reported participation in job training. Of those 88.7% reported that they felt the training was either 'important' or 'very important'

Health Care

35.6% reported receiving health care either 'often' or 'very often' and 57.9% reported 'sometimes' receiving health care in prison. In regard to health care for women, only 27.2% reported receiving care 'often' or 'very often'. 58.4% reported receiving care 'sometimes'. This may be due to the limited availability of medical staff. Additionally, sanitary napkins were only 'sometimes' available (50.4%) to the inmates. When asked about medical checkups, 49.4% reported not receiving a check-up prior to incarceration and 50.3% reported not having an HIV test prior to incarceration. 52.4% reported 'sometimes' having access to checkups for female related diseases. 71.3% reported 'not often' having received a psychological consultation which may be caused by the negative social stigma of those who request psychological services in Asia. Only 8.5% reported being pregnant or raising a child while in prison. Of those 59% reported 'not often' having health care provided to both the mother and child.

Health care is a concern among prison officials who are working to ensure adequate care is available to their inmates. There is a lack of trained medical professions who are willing to work within the prison system as well as to accept the typically low salaries offered to those who are willing to work within this environment. In discussions with medical care providers during visits to the prisons, this researcher often heard reports of the negative social stigma regarding medical professionals who choose to work in prisons. This coupled with the potentially dangerous environment and low salaries were effective in persuading most medical professionals to avoid this line of work. It is also important to remember that the above statistics may create an inaccurate perception of the medical care provided to inmates as only those inmates who request medical services or tests are given the necessary services or tests. Considering the average inmate is young and fairly healthy, she may not ask for specific tests or treatments and will thus respond negatively on this survey which gives the inaccurate impression that these services were not available when they may have been available, yet not required by respondents.

Prison Environment

The vast majority of inmate respondents reported that the prisons were clean, safe and provided enough food for inmates.

Summary:

While it is sometimes reported in local media that the majority of the drug trade involves foreigners or immigrants, this data clearly contradicts those assumptions as 80% of the inmates reported incarceration for drug related crimes and 94.1% of respondents claimed Thai nationality. Contrary to other reported research on female prison populations, the Thai inmates did not have a high rate of physical or sexual abuse in the home. The results of this survey also indicate that poverty and low education are

associated with incarceration. This conforms to global assumptions of female inmates. An additional area of concern is the dramatically high percentage of women incarcerated for drug use, specifically amphetamine. This coupled with the earlier data of inmate reports on the closeness of family suggests that it is not the childhood abuse path which is steering women into crime. The cause of such high rates of drug use and distribution are more likely to be financial and education levels which should be used as predictors of crime. Many of the respondents emphasized the importance of job training and perhaps this can be further explored as a means to decrease female arrests.

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