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INTRODUCTION: THE HISTORY OF PRISON SEX RESEARCH

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The study of prison sexuality began in the early 1900s with a few scant articles discussing the unnatural relationship between women behind bars. Today, the number of manuscripts on all aspects of sex in prison has increased. However, relatively few studies have focused on these “pains of imprisonment.” This article describes the history of prison sex research in the U.S. over the last 80 years.

In 1934, Joseph Fishman, a former inspector for federal prisons, wrote, “We are living in a frank and realistic age, yet the subject of sex in prison—so provocative, so vital, so timely . . . is shrouded in dread silence” (p. 5). Sixty-five years later, this statement still holds true. The subject of sex in prison has been largely ignored by social scientists, as well as society. Although research on sex in prison began in the early 1900s, relatively few studies have focused on the “pains of imprisonment.”

Consensual prison sex research began in the early 1900s with an article by Otis (1913) titled, “A Perversion Not Commonly Noted.” In the article, Otis described the “unnatural relationships” between Black and White women in reform schools and institutions for girls. In 1931, Selling identified several of these “girl-girl” relationships. These institutional pseudofamilies grew out of the relationships the girls had with their natural families. In addition to pseudofamilies, Selling identified three additional types of homosexual relationships, including friendship, pseudohomosexuality, and lesbianism. Unfortunately, neither Otis nor Selling relied on any type of statistical analysis to back up their findings.

In 1962, researchers began to use more precise, research-focused methodologies in their examination of consensual prison sex. Halleck and Hersko
(1962) collected data from 57 girls in a juvenile institution. They found that 69% of the girls had engaged in “girl stuff.” Only 5%, however, had stimulated another girl’s genitals, and only 7% had allowed another girl to stimulate hers while institutionalized. Most of these relationships had been “short-lived and superficial” (p. 913).

Ward and Kassebaum (1965) also found that female relationships within the Frontera Correctional Institution (a female correctional facility) were unstable and explosive. In addition, the researchers identified two main sexual roles within the women’s facility. The “butch,” who typically assumes the more dominant role, is expected to pursue the “femme.” The butches often trade their femininity for power and control. They sexually service the femmes who in return provide them with nonsexual goods and services. More than 50% of the women surveyed had engaged in “some form of overt sexual experience at least sometime during their sentence” (p. 43).

Giallombardo’s (1966) study of the Women’s Federal Reformatory in West Virginia found that female inmates developed close emotional, familial links with each other. These groups tended to satisfy each other’s psychological, social, and physiological needs. Approximately 86% of the sample had a homosexual experience while incarcerated.

In 1976, Propper undertook one of the most comprehensive studies of consensual sexual behavior in female and coed correctional facilities. Using data gathered from 396 female inmates in four female and three coed correctional institutions in the United States, Propper (1976, 1978, 1981, 1982) found that 14% of the women were in relationships with, or married to, another woman. In addition, 10% had kissed another woman, 10% wrote love letters to other female inmates, and 7% had sex beyond hugging and kissing with another woman while incarcerated.

Unfortunately, consensual sex research in male correctional facilities has been sparse. Only four studies have been conducted on the topic. Wooden and Parker (1982) conducted one of the most comprehensive studies of consensual sex in a California male correctional facility. More than 65% of a random sample of 200 inmates had engaged in consensual sex while incarcerated.

Nacci and Kane (1983) also conducted a study of sexual behavior in 17 federal correctional institutions. Approximately 30% of a random sample of 330 inmates had a homosexual experience while incarcerated. In addition, 12% claimed they had a homosexual encounter in their present institution.

In 1989, Tewksbury conducted a study of consensual sex in the Lebanon Correctional Institution in Ohio (Tewksbury, 1989b). More than 19% of the 150 inmates sampled had engaged in homosexual activity. Saum, Surratt, Inciardi, and Bennett (1995) conducted a study of male homosexuality in a
medium security facility in Delaware. Only 2% of the 101 male inmates reported having sex with another man while incarcerated during the previous year.

There has been more research devoted to the topic of sexual coercion in prison than to the consensual sexual activity of inmates. According to Tewksbury and West (2000), prison rape has gained more attention because it is readily perceived as an institutional and social problem. One of the earliest reports of coercive sex in prison was by Fishman (1934), a former inspector of conditions in federal prisons. He noted that a great number of young boys and men were pressured into “homosexuality” by relentless sexual predators who used trickery, debt, and threats of physical harm. Fishman was one of the first experts to explain how the prisoner code prevents inmates from reporting sexual assaults.

The earliest study on the prevalence of sexual coercion in prison was conducted by Davis (1982) in the late 1960s. Davis interviewed more than 3,000 inmates who had been held in the Philadelphia jail system. He concluded that approximately 2,000 of 60,000 men (3%) were sexually assaulted in a 26-month period. Davis’s work was published in Scacco’s (1982) classic book, Male Rape: A Casebook of Sexual Aggressions.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, several important works on the sexual coercion of men in prison appeared. Weiss and Friar (1974) concluded that “homosexual rape” was “rampant” in the prison environment. The motivation for the sexual assault of White prisoners by Black inmates in a maximum-security prison was explored by Carrol (1977). Lockwood (1980) authored a well-known book, Prison Sexual Violence, which documented the incidence and dynamics of sexual coercion in a New York state prison. On the basis of interviews with nearly 100 inmates, Lockwood concluded that 28% had been the target of sexual aggression, and 1.3% had been raped. Nacci and Kane (1983) interviewed more than 300 inmates from federal prisons and found similar rates of sexual aggression and rape.

One of the most-quoted books on prison sexual assault, Men Behind Bars: Sexual Exploitation in Prison, was published by Wooden and Parker in 1982. These authors conducted extensive interviews and confidential surveys of inmates in a California State prison facility that held a high percentage of homosexual inmates. In contrast to the low rates found in other studies, Wooden and Parker reported that 14% of 200 surveyed inmates had been sexually assaulted. Another valuable contribution during this time was Cotton and Groth’s (1982) article on strategies for prevention of prison sexual assault and treatment options for male victims.

A major advance in research on sexual coercion occurred in 1989 when the editors of The Prison Journal published a two-volume special issue on

Few studies regarding prison sexual coercion were published in the early 1990s. Starchild (1990) wrote one of the few existing works on sexual assault in juvenile corrections facilities. An article about the injuries of adult male rape victims was published by Lipscomb, Muram, Speck, and Mercer (1992). By title, the study appeared to be about men who had been raped in a community setting. However, 80 of the 119 victims were inmates who had been transferred from prison to a local medical clinic for treatment. Dumond (1992) published a review of the literature that served to remind social scientists and society of the compelling problems associated with prison sexual assault.

In a midwestern American prison, Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson, Rucker, Bumby, and Donaldson (1996) found that 12% of nearly 500 male inmates had experienced completed sexual assaults. They also documented the emotional trauma of victims, low report rates, and alleged participation of prison staff in sexual-assault incidents. Hensley (2000b) reported that 14% of 174 inmates interviewed in Oklahoma prisons had been sexually threatened, and 1% had been raped. Patterns of “sexual pressure” by bisexual and gay men in protective custody in a midwestern county jail were studied by Alarid (2000).

A significant event in the 1990s was the initiation of research on female victims of prison sexual assault. Up to this time, male inmates were the focus of nearly every study of prison sexual coercion. One exception was an early work by Kassebaum (1972), who noted that women in prison were sexually exploited by other female inmates and prison staff. However, in 1996, Human Rights Watch published a report charging that many female inmates were sexually abused by male guards in state prisons, including facilities in California, Georgia, Illinois, and Michigan. A call for research and reform was made by Baro (1997), who reviewed the history of sexual abuse of female inmates in Hawaii.

As a result, there have been new investigations of sexual-coercion rates in women’s facilities in recent years. Struckman-Johnson et al. (1996) reported that 7% of a small sample of women in a Nebraska facility had been sexually coerced, but none had been raped. In 1999, Struckman-Johnson and Struckman-Johnson found that from 0% to 27% of 263 female inmates in
three midwestern prisons had been sexually coerced. Rape rates ranged from 0% to 3%. In contrast to the Human Rights Watch (1996) report, these authors found that about half of the incidents were perpetrated by other female inmates.

Recent studies conducted by Eigenberg (1989, 1992, 1994, in press) have described the development of research on attitudes and sexuality in prisons. As she notes, the earliest research on attitudes toward male rape in prison has been discussed in studies on homosexuality. This body of literature concentrated almost exclusively on identifying topologies of homosexuality (Buffum, 1972; Clemmer, 1958; Davis, 1982; Fishman, 1934; Kirkham, 1971; Sagarin, 1976; Sykes, 1958). However, these studies also included male rape victims and/or prostitutes in their classification schemes that were supposedly created to discuss consensual same-sex behavior. Researchers operated under the domain assumption that inmates had to have sexual gratification and that sexual deprivation resulted when “normal” sexual outlets (i.e., women) were unavailable. Researchers argued heterosexual men sometimes engaged in homosexual behavior as a way to meet their sexual needs, but they were not to be confused with “true” homosexual men, who voluntarily engaged in same-sex relationships regardless of the availability of women. It is interesting that the research on homosexuality included instances of rape because the authors failed to identify many types of consensual acts as rapes. Instead, both rapists and victims were portrayed as situational homosexuals responding to sexual deprivation (Eigenberg, 1992).

Unfortunately, it is very difficult to determine whether the attitudes toward sexuality and rape expressed in these early studies represent the attitudes of inmates or researchers. Most of these works lack any empirical basis, and it is not clear how the authors came to make these conclusions. Although these studies provide important insights into the social construction of rape and sexuality in prisons, it is not clear whose reality is being described.

Few studies have concentrated on examining correctional officers and their attitudes toward rape and prison sexuality (Eigenberg, 1989, 1992, 1994, in press). Ironically, almost none of the literature has directly examined inmates’ attitudes toward sexuality and rape in prison. The research by Hensley (2000a [this issue]) and Alarid (2000) fill an important gap in this body of literature. Their studies of inmate attitudes toward homosexuality provide a critical contribution to a field that is developing rather slowly. Ironically, we know very little about how inmates construct definitions of sexuality. For example, do inmates identify themselves in relation to a core sexual identity (e.g., heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual)? Do inmates distinguish between having sex with a person of the same sex and a homosex-
ual orientation or identity? Do sexual experiences in prison affect their self-identification? Do inmates who define themselves as heterosexual redefine themselves as homosexual or bisexual if they engage in sex with a person of the same sex during incarceration? Is this process of self-identification influenced by rape or the threat of rape? How do inmates’ sexual experiences in prison affect their postprison sexuality? Do inmates clearly distinguish between rape, prostitution, and consensual sexuality? How do their definitions of prostitution and rape affect their definitions of sexuality? The current literature on homosexuality in prison addresses few, if any, of these questions. There is a great need for additional research that examines inmate attitudes, consensual sex, and coerced sex in prison so that we can begin to explore the answers to these types of questions.

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